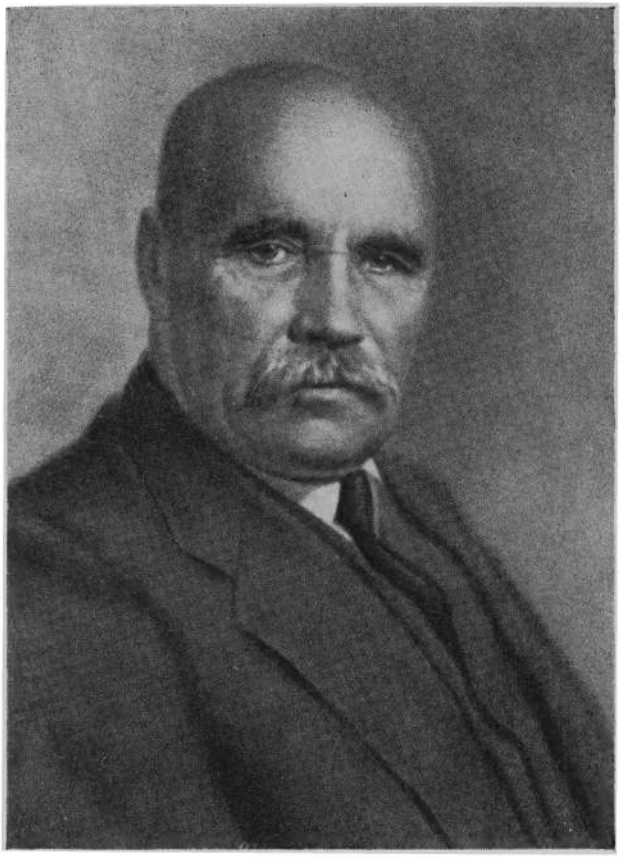
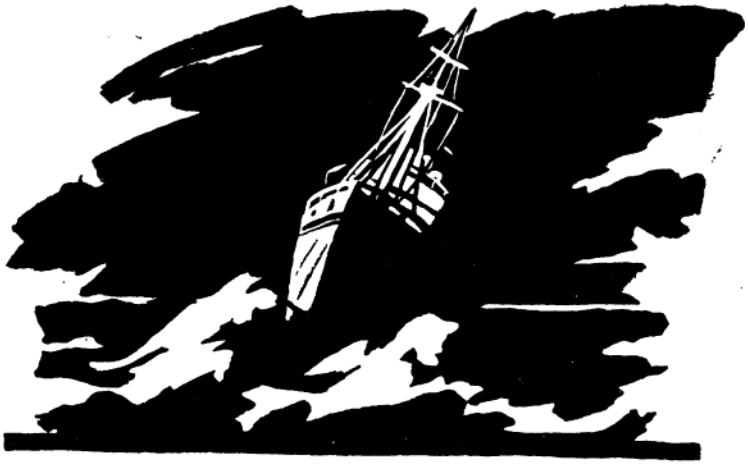
NOVIKOV-PRIBOI

THE SEA BECKONS





Новиков-Прибой

МОРЕ ЗОВЕТ

ПОВЕСТИ И РАССКАЗЫ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
МОСКВА

Novikov-Priboi

THE SEA BECKONS

Short Novels and Stories

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
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by *Yuri Krasny*

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DESTINY

IT happened long ago, when I was quite a child.

I remember a calm summer evening. Mother and I, with bags over our shoulders, had just left the monastery, where we had gone to pray, and were returning to our village. The road wound through a lovely wood. Slender pines reared their green heads into the cloudless sky, offering resinous incense to the sun. A golden shower of sunbeams, streaming through the tree-tops, fell upon the silvery carpet of moss, tracing upon it patterns as intricate as life itself. A greenish lustre lay upon everything. The dry pine needles crunched underfoot.

It was hot.

Mother, in her drab calico dress, white kerchief with pale-blue spots, and worn-down shoes, walked with a light tread. Her face, which had once been beautiful, was covered with a fine web of wrinkles and her thin lips were set in a severe line. Her blue eyes alone shone with the light of an unearthly bliss. She was pleased that I had consented at last to become a monk.

"You will lead a holy life, son," she said affectionately, touching my shoulder. "Imagine a white clean little cell.

Icons on the walls. An icon-lamp burning. You live all alone. No temptations, no sins. Just you alone, communing with the Lord."

My father, a soldier in a Polish gubernia town, had eloped with my mother and settled down in a poor little village lost amid the backwoods. Although, in marrying him, she had adopted the Orthodox religion, our image-case at home to this day contains Catholic as well as Orthodox icons, both of which are held in equal esteem. Homesickness, drudgery, the ridicule of neighbours, who treated her as a foreigner (she spoke with a Polish accent), and the soul-killing, squalid peasant life to which she was unused, made her life a misery. She grew old before her time and often wept over her lost youth. And so she came to look upon the world as a vale of tears and sorrow, and turned all the thoughts of her dreamy soul to religion; she was particularly fond of visiting the monastery, and brought me up in the same pious spirit.

"The thing is you will not be tainted by worldly sins," my mother went on in her sweet melodious voice. "In the monastery no human malice will poison your heart. Quietly and humbly, by righteous paths, you will go your earthly way with heavenly bliss in your heart. And God, too, will be pleased to see your soul clean as fresh snow, without a single stain upon it. . . ."

My mother's gentle speech fell soothingly upon my ear, attuning my soul to a devotional key. My thoughts travelled back to the monastery, that lovely cloister standing in a grove of tall trees between two big rivers. This time I had been more than ever impressed by the magnificent churches, the shining splendour of the gilt iconostasis, the gorgeous vestments of the bishops, and most of all by the solemn singing of the choir, which had sent my young soul soaring heavenwards as if on wings. The voice of one of the monks, a broad-shouldered hairy man with a head like a lion, still sounded in my ears. When he sang, his

mouth wide open and the whites of his eyes rolling, the very walls of the cathedral shook with his tremendous booming bass.

"You know what, Mamma?" I said.

"Yes, my dear?" she said, straightening the kerchief on her head.

"When I grow up there in the monastery I'll have a voice like that big monk has."

"What monk is that?"

"The one who looks like a lion. With the wart on his nose."

"Silly boy! Fancy saying such things. A lion is a beast, but a monk is a holy father."

"I'll have to eat a lot more though—*shchi*, and porridge, and fish—to become a strong man. Then I'll drink vodka or something to get a gruff voice with a proper roar in it. Then I'll sing louder than that monk, won't I?"

Mother flung her hands up in dismay.

"Oh, you sinner, you. Why, you will have to fast. . . ."

But I was not listening to her. I stopped, puffed out my cheeks, and began to sing *By the Rivers of Babylon* in a gruff voice, in imitation of the booming monk.

"Do I sound like him?"

"You do, son," my mother said, smiling, and kissed me on the cheek. "Come along."

The road turned off and ran along the edge of the high bank. Under the steep bluff the broad river slid by slowly, its surface a flaming mirror of sunshine. The opposite bank with its golden sand sloped gently down to the water. Along it ran a wide strip of flood-meadow dotted with clumps of bushes and small lakes. Here, to the strong smell of resin were added the scent of flowers and the tang of the river. The bell in the monastery rang for vespers. I crossed myself and looked back: the domes of the churches with their shining golden crosses stood out sharply against a dark background of blue sky and green forest.

The deep-toned peal flowed over the countryside, and it seemed to me as if everything around—the quiet river, the green meadows, the slumbering woods and the limpid air—had sprung to life, palpitating for sheer joy and singing in tune with that bell. My soul, filled with heaven-sent music, was prepared for any deed of valour. I looked down at the glassy surface of the water, and found myself thinking, for some reason, that the life of a monk resembled the sparkling river, whose clear waters flowed gently and peacefully between picturesque banks to the twitter of soaring swallows and the warbling of the larks, forever onward into those unknown regions where sky and earth meet. There, probably, were the golden gates of paradise.

"Not bad," I said aloud.

"What?" Mother asked.

"Not bad to be a monk."

"Rather."

Now all the bells were a-ringing, and the woods repeated the changes with a merry echo.

A smile lit up my mother's face.

A little way in front of us, slightly off the road, a man lay, resting on his elbow, gazing out into the blue distance. He was about twenty-six, dressed in a peculiar style of costume that I had never seen before.

"Who is that?" I asked my mother in a whisper.

"A sailor. One of those who travel in ships."

The day-dreams inspired by the ringing bells vanished at once, fell away from my soul like the petals of a beautiful flower shaken by a gust of wind.

When we drew abreast of him he got up and said cheerily:

"Good day, godly folks."

We answered his greeting with a bow.

"Where are you bound?" the sailor asked, joining us.

Mother began telling him, while I stared at him, unable to conceal my astonishment. His black bell-bottomed trou-

sers, and his dark-blue flannel shirt with an open collar baring part of his chest and the whole of his neck, went well with his trim figure. His face, flushed with the heat, looked extremely brave and dashing in that white-edged little cap which he wore tilted on one side of his head. The gold letters on the satin band, whose long ends fell down his back like two plaits, filled me with awe. I read the mysterious words "Storm Conqueror" over several times.

"I want to fix my son up in the monastery," my mother was telling him. "They promised to take him in next month."

"So you're going to be God's pipe, eh?" the sailor said, peering into my face with a laugh that revealed a row of sugar-white teeth. His breath smelt of vodka.

"I'm going to be a monk, not God's pipe," I answered rather huffily.

"You ought to get a little more experience of the world and its sinful ways before becoming a monk. Otherwise you'll find it dull: what will you ask of God?"

Mother threw the sailor an angry look, but what interested me was the writing on his cap.

"That's the name of the ship I sailed in, my lad."

"Did you sail in a ship? On the river?"

"No, on the seas."

"The real seas?"

"Yes, of course."

"Would you believe it!" I exclaimed, using a pet phrase of my father's.

Twirling his fair moustache, the sailor told Mother that he had been on a visit to his father-in-law in another village, where he had washed down an omelette with a little vodka. Now he was returning home and felt as gay as a lark.

"God likes fun, you know—he was a jolly old boy himself. That's why he made singing birds and all kinds of flowers and things. I'm sure he hates the sight of sour

mugs, whether they belong to devils or monks. You can take my word for that, madam."

He spoke noisily, as if addressing a deaf audience, waving his arms and laughing with an engaging candour brimful of youth and vitality.

Excited, dying to know more, I kept bombarding him with questions.

"The sea!" he exclaimed, glancing at me with his keen grey eyes. "That's where you have free space, my lad! No matter where you turn your ship's head, you have an open road before you. Ah, that's life! That's where you see the world! And the creatures in it—you'd be surprised! Sometimes you can't tell whether it's a fish or some kind of beast. There are so many of them, and all built on different lines. You see something swimming about in the water, round and shiny like a rainbow. But when you pull it out it's just a lump of jelly. You wouldn't believe it, but it's a living creature, too. Why, kid, if you was to take just a peep at the sea with half an eye you'd be struck all of a heap."

Then he told me about ships, and how they were handled.

"Do our ships go to foreign countries, too?" I asked, staring at the sailor with all my eyes.

"Yes. I've been overseas several times."

"But don't they kill Russians out there?"

"Goodness, no! Why should they? They're men just like us. It's savages you're thinking of. They go about stark naked. Some of them are as black as a raven's wing. Real funny, I tell you."

Foreign lands were associated in my mind with the beautiful fairy-tales I had heard from Mother. There everything was strange and wonderful, not at all like it was in our village. The sailor confirmed it, too, when he spoke about palm-trees that grew there, about nuts the size of a baby's head, about gigantic flowers, about fruits as sweet

as honey, and a blazing sun right overhead that could kill a man like a bolt of lightning.

Occasionally we met passers-by, and it seemed to me that they all looked admiringly at the sailor and his wonderful dress.

"You ask whether one can see the shores at sea?" the sailor continued, flattered by the breathless interest with which I was listening to his yarns. "You couldn't see a damn thing, not if you was to climb up the tallest mast. Sometimes you sail for a week, two weeks, with nothing round you but water and water."

Glancing at the river, silvered by the slanting rays of the setting sun, I tried to imagine the vastness of the sea, but the opposite bank cut off my vision. All I saw were sand-banks, lush green meadows, and farther out a rolling field, like a steppe, with villages and hamlets lost in it.

"But how can there be shores you can't see?"

The sailor smiled.

"Look at the sky. D'you see any shores there? It's the same at sea. And it's just as deep. Plenty of room, eh?"

I walked along with my head thrown back, my eyes sweeping the fathomless blue of the sky from which poured the merry notes of a lark, and I saw there a soaring kite. That, I thought, is probably the way the ship *Storm Conqueror* sailed the seas. How wonderful! Just like a fairy-tale!

The sailor could not keep silent. While I was daydreaming, he was telling Mother how he had learned painting under an icon painter.

"A terrible drunkard that master of mine was, and one of the bawdiest fellows alive. One day he passed over to me an order for a picture of Our Lady and went off to the pub to make a night of it. Well, I painted that icon as best I could and waited for the master. He came home the next day. Stood swaying in front of the holy image, arms

akimbo. 'What d'you call that? he says. 'Is that supposed to be the Mother of God? Why, she's a. . . .' And he started showering curses down on me and my art from the upper bridge. Then he wound up by saying: 'Stick a beard on, and she'll do for St. Nicholas.' You daren't disobey him—he'd get wild and pitch into you. So that's how our icons are painted if you'd like to know. . . ."

The sailor was about to enlarge upon the subject, but Mother got cross and pleaded with him:

"Please tell us rather about the sea."

He agreed with alacrity and told me about gales, dropping his voice and making frightened eyes.

"That's when you're in for it. . . . Not long ago, on my last voyage out, we came up against it in the Atlantic. All at once clouds came scuttling up. The sky was black with them, as if God had spilt a river of ink. The wind started blowing like mad. It was a snorter of a gale, just like a drunken tramp tearing about on the rampage. At first the ocean just sort of scowled and looked sullen, then it started heaving and snarled like a beast. It was awful! But our ship didn't bear the name of *Storm Conqueror* for nothing. Gales meant nothing to her. A tremendous sea would crash over her, flooding the whole upper deck, but she'd just shake herself and push ahead like a maddened beast. And our commander, let me tell you, fitted his ship to a T. Had a face that would stop a clock—regular signboard for a pub. All red and bloated with a moustache to his ears, and eyes like mutton-pies. A downright bully he was, as fierce as they make 'em. One day, when he was drunk, he saw a shark in the sea, and he went for it with just a dagger in his hand. And what d'you think? He killed the damned brute, stabbed it before it knew where it was! Well, as I was saying, during that gale he was pretty well loaded up, and just stood on the bridge, grinning and enjoying himself. You couldn't tell the sky from the ocean, the whole world was topsy-turvy, and it looked as if it

would go all to smash any minute, but he just kept saying: 'This hell's music does me good. . . .' And he laughed like a hyena."

"My God, how dreadfull" Mother said.

"Nothing dreadful about it," the sailor said. "At first you feel a bit nervy, but when you've got your sea-legs you feel all right."

We came out into a field. The road sheered away from the river and wound through the field like a grey ribbon. Corn-flowers made blue splashes here and there among the young rye.

The sailor spoke about ship life, kindling his own and my enthusiasm as he went along. My vivid impressions of the monastery began to pale and fade as I listened to him. His stories thrilled me, unfolding the picture of a new stirring life, full of interesting adventures. I already began to imagine the future not within the white walls of a cloister, but on board a ship, the *Storm Conqueror*, sailing in unknown seas through boundless sunny spaces, or battling with gales, wild waves beneath her and heavy storm-clouds above her.

"Well, I must leave you here. Our roads part," the sailor suddenly said, stopping at the forking of the road. "Good-bye to you."

"Good-bye," we answered in one voice.

"I'm sorry, madam, if I've let my tongue run away with me," the sailor said to my mother with a genial smile. "I love a joke. It's God's gift, you know. He was a great joker himself. There's the sea, for instance. Side by side with beautiful creatures you'll find a thing like an octopus living in it. Dammit, it's just a shame! That's a poor kind of joke, anyway. Or take that cow of my neighbour Fedot that dropped a calf with two heads—what's that supposed to be? And, besides, madam, I am connected with the clergy in a manner of speaking. . . ."

"Really?" Mother said in pleased surprise.

"Why, sure. In the first place I learned to read and write from the sexton, and secondly, I had an uncle whose main job was to rob churches."

"Oh, you're making fun again!" my mother said, shaking her head reproachfully.

The sailor turned to me and shook my hand, his merry eyes twinkling mischievously.

"You'd make a fine sailor, my lad, from what I can see."

Such praise set my heart leaping.

The sailor went away. I watched him going and was sorry that our talk was over so soon. He had knocked about the world so much and knew so many things! His strapping, broad-shouldered figure, swaying above the ears of rye, sailed away in the parting beams of sunset. He struck me, in those sailor's clothes, as being wonderfully smart and handsome, quite unlike the men I was accustomed to meet in the village. He seemed to have come from another world.

The day was ebbing. The river, from which there drew a pleasant coolness, was a welter of crimson in the afterglow. Two quails were calling to each other.

My mind in a turmoil of intoxicated thoughts, I was thinking of the sea. Suddenly I caught myself.

"Wait for me here, Mother, I want to ask that sailor something I'd forgotten."

"Well, of all the crazy things...." My mother's displeased voice sounded behind me as I rushed straight through the rye to overtake the sailor.

"Hi! Sailor! Wait a minute!" I cried.

But the sailor, who was about half a mile away, did not hear me, and walked on with a rolling gait.

"Hullo, what is it, my lad?" he said, stopping, when I had come within earshot, hot and panting.

"The ocean.... Nothing but water all round.... Can't see any shores.... No roads either.... Then how is it that people don't lose their way there?"

The sailor burst out laughing.

"Well, I'll be jiggered! So that's what's worrying you! All right, then, I'll tell you."

He drew a circle in the road dust, marked it off, and explained to me at great length how a compass worked.

"It's the chief instrument on a ship, young fry. Without it a vessel is like a man without eyes."

Mother stood, waving her hand to me frantically.

"Thank you, old chap," I said. "I'm going to be a sailor. I won't become a monk."

"That's the stuff. You'll only get mouldy in a monastery. It'll never make a man of you. If it comes to that you can pray anywhere you like. It says so in the scriptures: 'Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool. . . .' "

He took leave of me as if I were his equal, and I felt tremendously flattered.

I went back to my mother richer in experience. She scolded me, but I struck a proud pose and declared determinedly:

"You may be angry with me if you like, but I'm just not going into a monastery. I'll only get mouldy there. . . ."

"Good heavens, what is he saying! Where will you go, then?"

"I'll go and be a sailor."

Mother went white.

"You are crazy! Do you want to be drowned?"

"Not at all. I'll come back as fine a fellow as that sailor. And I'll bring presents from foreign lands, the finest there are. . . ."

Tears welled up in Mother's eyes. She clutched her head and began railing at the sailor.

"That arch-fiend—what has he done to my boy! He has gone and put ideas into his head!"

We proceeded on our way. The russet shadows of evening closed softly around us. A village with a white church loomed up in front, but we were not going to stop

there; we would go on like this till morning, making the most of the night's coolness. The air grew moist and one could breathe easily. It smelt of road dust and field grasses. Down the dimming river, which receded from us at a sharp bend, there sailed a long string of rafts, and a fire blazing on them threw a glow all round; the sound of a song, broad and sweeping as the immense stretch of rolling fields, floated upon the air. Wreaths of milky mist rose ghost-like from the meadows.

I looked at Mother, who walked along sad and forlorn. She complained of her hard lot, lamented that I had not justified her hopes. I realized with a pang how she was suffering. But what could I do? The *Storm Conqueror*, that mysterious wonder-ship sailing distant seas, haunted me. The sailor had opened bright new windows in my mind, given me a glimpse of shining vistas. I would not waste my life now in the soul-stifling deadening atmosphere of the village. No! My future was out there, somewhere far far away upon the blue seas and boundless oceans, whither youth's fancy rushed me on eagle's wings.

1920

STORY OF THE BOATSWAIN'S MATE

YOU boys are just beginning your service, one might say. You have ship's rations galore waiting to be bolted down. No end of them. But as for me, this is my last cruise. Three months from now I won't be called aloft to stand watch any more; I'll be sitting snug at home. I've had enough of the sea—seven years of it, almost. And that's saying a lot, you know. Yes, sir....

But never mind; it's not so bad, really. Especially if you get out on a foreign cruise. A useful experience, that. Besides, a sailor's life is a cut above what the grabbies have to put up with. Service in the infantry isn't much of a muchness, but what's the good of it, what can it teach you? You've heard that story about a grabby arguing with a sailor as to who was better educated. The grabby started giving orders: left turn, right turn, about face and all that kind of nonsense. The sailor went through it right smart. And now, landlubber, he says, take my orders. That army chap stood up stiff like he's swallowed a poker, and puffed his cheeks out. In the twinkling of an eye the sailor climbed to the third floor and dropped a sandbag on him. "Stand clear!" the sailor yelled. The soldier should have

jumped clear, but he didn't budge. The bag hit him right on the knob, nearly killed him, it did.

They're not a patch on us sailors! Then look at the freedom we have! It's a bit hard at times, what with discipline, and standing watch; then all-hands' jobs are a bit bothersome, and gales give you a scare, sometimes a pretty bad one, too. No wonder there's a saying: he hasn't known trouble who hasn't been to sea. But then the places you see! It makes a different man of you, sharpens your wits, gives you guts. There isn't a man the sea hasn't done good to.

I'll tell you how I was licked into shape, boys. And you try to catch on. It may come in useful. When I was a youngster I used to sit in the fo'c'sle just the way you're doing now, and listen to the old salts handing out sailor wisdom.

We had hell afloat from the very start. Our instructor was a brute of a driver. He hazed us like the devil. The food was rotten too. The stuff they called soup was more like dish-water than anything else. And on top of all I felt miserable and homesick. I dreamed of my home village, waking and sleeping. I was sorry for Father and Mother. They were very old and badly off. What's more, I had a sweetheart. Nastya, her name was. A fine lass, let me tell you. A real peach, she was. Blooming cheeks, laughing eyes, blue as a tropical sea. She sailed across the floor like a captain's gig. Her smile just dazzled you. And when she dressed up and put red ribbons into her long plait, you couldn't tear your eyes away from her. We used to spoon right through the nights. Used to get into some barn or other nook and make love from evening till morning. Yes, she was a lovesome lass, hot as they make 'em. But I played fair by her, because she was everything in the world to me.

Yes, I took it very badly. But time passed, and to forget myself, I started to learn to read and write. I was an igno-

rant lad—hadn't seen anything outside my village—and this learning and sea life put me up to a power of things.

After we'd been licked into shape, we took the oath and became real seamen. Spring came. Warm. Larks singing. Trees budding in the parks, grass sprouting green. Air fresh, bracing. The sea smiled at the sun, glad to be free of the ice. Men cheered up. Things in the naval harbour started humming. Some ships were already out on a shakedown cruise, others were still being rigged. We, too, started to rig our three-masted cruiser. We worked with might and main. In a month the job was finished: our ship was lying in the outer roadstead, spick and span, flying a pennant at her mast.

Sea life started.

Truth to tell, I walked about the ship at first all in a daze and didn't understand a blessed thing. There were so many names of different gadgets to remember, and none of them Russian. Try and learn all that headachy stuff like Englishman's ties, and Flemish knots, and French shroud knots and sheet bends; then bowline bridles, reef tackle, rope-bands and things. On top of that you're supposed to understand compasses, sounding leads, logs, and signals. You've got to know how to lift weights, how to handle a ship's boat under oar and sail. Sail handling alone is enough to chase you up a tree. Sometimes the instructor would explain things, while you stood there like a darned dummy with your mouth wide open. It was enough to drive a fellow mad. I thought I'd never learn all that ship's wisdom, not if I lived to be a hundred. I'd lie in my hammock at night, repeating over and over again: the fore-and-aft rig of a cruiser are the flying jib, foretop-staysail and fore trysail. And the moment I'd drop off there would be Nastya, standing before me fresh as a strawberry in the sunshine, smiling and beckoning to me. Once I dreamt she had left the dance circle with another fellow, who had his arm round her. I tumbled out of my hammock and hit

the deck with a whack. It's all very well for you to laugh. Strikes me as funny now, too. But it didn't then. My imagination played the devil with me, I can tell you.

One day we were told off to fetch stores from town. They gave us the market boat—a fourteen-oar. Going there in the morning the weather was fine, but coming back in the evening a terrific gale came on. At least, that's what it seemed to me. I hadn't seen a sizable river before, let alone the sea. The wind and waves ran wild. The sea roared and foamed like a maddened beast and dashed spray over us. Our boat was tossed about like a nutshell. I was scared out of my wits. Topping a wave wasn't so bad, but when you came plunging down it gave you a sick feeling in the pit of the stomach. Takes your breath away. Seeing a wall of water coming at you, you thought, well, now it's all up. But you rode it somehow. Then before you could draw breath another one was on top of you. At any moment you were likely to have the oar torn out of your hands and yourself thrown smack into the sea. But our coxswain, a pimply blue-faced fellow with a big froggish mouth and great, green, wild-looking eyes, sat at the helm cool as a cucumber. We young sailors were saying our prayers, while he cursed away at us for all he was worth.

"Pull, damn you, you snivelling milksops!"

And he'd run through the whole list of saints and gods, big ones and little ones, with special reference to livers, guts, and kidneys. That put the wind up you still more, and you made a worse hash of it.

I'm not a big man, as men go, but God gave me strength enough and to spare. Thirty-eight and a half inches round the chest. I got wild and started tugging at the oar. It broke in two. The coxswain gave me a punch in the jaw. That knocked the last bit of sense out of me. I sat clutching the thwart with both hands, and the sea seemed to me a desert with a herd of white horses galloping across it.

The sea spat at me, and so did the coxswain.

"Here, take that!" he'd snarl, and the next minute he'd shake his fist at the sky. I sat there more dead than alive.

Suddenly I heard, "Fend off!"

And then, "Boat the oars!"

I looked round and saw our cruiser. Whew, thank God.... I had shivering fits all night, though. I cursed the day I was born.

I had scarcely got over one adventure, when I was thrown into another. They started to teach us to climb aloft, up in the shrouds. Our ship was running hard and rolling pretty heavily. They sent me aloft. I started up. The shrouds wabbled. My legs and hands shook. The higher I went the more scared I got. I started back. But the bos'un—the crew called him Herring because after fifteen years of service he was pickled in brine—took a couple of whacks at me with a rubber line. It was like the lick of a flame on my back and sent me whizzing up to the topmast before I knew where I was. Made me dizzy to look down. The rolling of the ship was still worse up there. I was in a blue funk. I just lay down on the platform, my teeth chattering, and hung on for dear life. The bos'un laid about him with his line, but I just wouldn't let go. Four more petty officers came crawling up. They barely managed to tear my hands away. Had to bowse me down to the deck. I was the laughing-stock of the whole ship.

I felt worse than ever after that. Wrote a letter home saying good-bye, you won't see your son any more. I'd have skipped out if it hadn't been for the helmsman, a countryman from my own parts, who kept telling me, "Wait till you get used to it, you'll sing a different tune then."

"No," I said, "I can't stand it any longer."

"Oh, you'll get over it in time."

And so I did. I got used to ship routine, and began to get the hang of things. Started going about my duties

with a blithe heart. Got curious about things, too. Take the lightning-conductor, for instance. It's a pity the night's dark and you can't see it. Have a look at the mast-top tomorrow in the day-time, boys. You'll see an iron rod there. That's the lightning-conductor. Interesting gadget, I tell you! You're afraid of lightning, I know. So was I once. Fancied it was Elijah the Prophet in a fit of anger shooting darts at sinful people. I didn't get to know this was all humbug until I was on the ship. No harm can come to a ship that has such a gadget, not if a thousand thunders and lightnings ripped the sky. That's a fact. Honestly speaking, that's what started putting ideas into my head. Till then I had had more guts than brains. But now the knob works like your dynamo engine—throws a light on what's going on around.

Little by little I shook down into my place on board the ship, and found my sea-legs. My heart got steeled. Even the chief officer was pleased with me when he saw the change. He'd pat me on the back and say:

"Well done, Grachov! You're going to make a fine sailor, from what I can see."

"Doing my best, sir!" I'd answer.

The other young sailors were coming up to scratch too. During sail drill, the quartermaster would walk onto the bridge and yell:

"Lay aloft there! Out upon the tops!"

And we'd scramble up the shrouds like mad. Faster'n cats. Then out he'd come with another order:

"Lay out upon the yards!"

Pretty high up, that was, but you worked like you was down on deck. The ship's pitching and tossing meant nothing.

Wait a minute, Dambuoy, can't you see I'm busy, teaching sense to the young. He's only a dog, mind you, but such a matey beggar. I think he understands everything. Only he can't express himself. When the sailors start their

horseplay, he grins, too, and yelps with joy. He really laughs. But if you make a fool of yourself in front of him, he'll slink away with his tail between his legs, sort of ashamed and disgusted, as much as to say, "I'll have nothing to do with you, blockhead." This is the third time we're cruising together. He was in a pretty funk, too, at first. In thick weather he'd howl like a hog in a high wind. As for being seasick, he was as bad as any of us. And now he's a regular old sea-dog! Once in Libau he started to get off with a bitch and got left behind. The crew didn't know it until they got back to the ship. We gave our Dambuoy up for lost. But after a night out he came swimming back to the ship in the morning.

I've been on a foreign cruise twice during my sailoring. I wish to God you were all as lucky. First I went in a cruiser, qualifying for quartermaster. It was the devil to pay. Afterwards I was transferred to a gunboat. Life was better there.

Ah, boys, it's grand, going out on a long cruise! You roam the blue seas, feast your eyes on all kinds of marvels, and have a jolly good time.... I've been almost everywhere—in Europe, America, Africa, and India. The different kinds of people I've seen! The Germans and English are not what you'd call chatty, but then the French and Italians beat the band! Lively isn't the word for it! If they can't say it with their tongues, they'll use their hands, their legs and heads, anything so long as they can make conversation. They have drinks with our sailors, sing songs together, and swap caps and shirts.

Once we were laying at Naples. Dirtyish town with lots of poor, but if you ask me it's a better place than any of those German towns. Just drenched in sunshine. And a jolly place, too. Here sounds of laughter, there music playing, and songs ringing in the air. Happy-go-lucky people, those Italians, I must say. Live like God's birds, without a care in the world. They believe in having a good time.

Nice and friendly, too. On one side of the city there's a mountain, a volcano. Said to be nearly a mile high. It smokes in the day-time, and glows at night just like a fire. Glorious sight! When I saw that volcano I was struck all of a heap. First thing I did was to go and see the ship's surgeon.

"Please, sir," I says, "can you explain why that smoke's coming out of the earth?"

He was a good fellow, our surgeon. He told me exactly how that fiery lava stuff got to be where it was, and how it sometimes pushed through the earth. He gave me some books, too, and I got to know all about it first-hand.

Right next to the volcano was the ancient town of Pompeii. Ages ago, soon after the birth of Christ, that volcano buried it in ashes, and now the Italians have dug it out. Interests of science, you know. I walked through it. It's the real thing—streets and houses.

You'd be surprised!

We called at Algiers, too. Interesting place. It was December out of doors, but we walked about dressed as if it was summer—it was that warm. Tall white houses with flat roofs. Green trees lining the streets. Gardens full of flowers. Dates hanging from the trees in bunches, almost ripe already. Awnings stretched outside the restaurants, with people sitting under them at little tables, sipping cool drinks. Curious folks, those Africans. Some of them are just swarthy, but others are as black as soot, with thick blue-berry lips. Funny clothes, too. The women wear white cloaks with gathers on the back. Faces veiled. That's to keep strangers' eyes off. But in front of their husbands they throw all their clothes off. There—feast your eyes. The men wear cloaks too, and turbans on their heads.

In Algiers one sub bought a monkey. A mischievous little devil it was, confound it! When we went up in the shrouds, it was sure to be there with us. And what do you think? Right up to the truck. Or else it would salute a

fellow real regulation style, and stick its tongue out at another. It was up to all kinds of tricks. It was jolly good fun for the crew, though.

The electrical artificer said that men and monkeys had the same ancestors.

"Is that true?" I says.

"It's a fact, the genuine article," he says, but that was about all the light he could throw on it.

So off I went to the surgeon again for information.

"Now that," he says, "you're not supposed to know."

"Why not, sir?"

"Because you'll be happier for not knowing it," he says.

I tried to get round him one way and another. Bought him a present—a talking parrot in a cage. But not even that could make him speak. He just grinned into his moustache. But when I get a thing on the brain there's no holding me back. So I tried tackling the midshipman. We struck up a conversation during the night-watch and I dropped a hint.

"Mind you, a monkey's only an animal," I says, "but look how strongly it resembles a man."

"What of it?" he says.

"And it's smart, too.... Sort of takes after human beings."

"Does it?"

I couldn't go on with it. He looked so stern that my nerve failed me. All I said was:

"The wonderful works of the Lord are to be seen in all things, sir."

He looked at me, shook his head and came out with, "You're an ass, Grachov."

But the surgeon came round after all. We were lying in a French port, and he took me with him to a museum. The place was chock-full of stuffed animals and birds. That's when he told me all about it. According to him,

not only man and the monkey have the same ancestors, but every living creature, whether it's a horse, a snake, a dog, or a worm, come from the same cell. He made it plain as a pikestaff. Just turned all my notions upside down.

We called at a few more ports and after seven months out we headed home, that's to say, for Kronstadt. When we weren't steaming we put up sails. The ship's company got friendly during that time, got used to life at sea and mastered the routine. They set the sails in two or three minutes. We had thick weather, though. We got it worst of all in the Bay of Biscay. The waves all but swept the bridge away. Pounded the ship's sides like battering-rams. We got such a buffeting, it was a wonder we escaped with our lives. Only one sailor got washed overboard. Drowned, poor fellow. A windy corner, that bay, dammit! Many a seaman has lost his life there.

Our commander had the devil of a temper. It was his first year in a cruiser. Was he fond of the crew, though! If the food was bad he'd blow everyone's head off in the galley. He had a hair trigger of a temper and the cut of his jib was simply ferocious. His face ran mostly to hair and eyebrows, and he had eyes as sharp as an eagle's. If anyone committed the slightest offence, he'd go red in the face and get so mad he could chew nails.

"Go away! Quick! I'll kill you!" he'd shout like a madman. He'd snatch the cap off a sailor's head and start tearing it to little pieces. And an hour or two later he'd come to his senses and have the man up in his cabin.

"I'm sorry for what happened," he'd say. "Here, buy yourself a new cap."

And he'd give the fellow a couple of rubles.

At first the sailors were frightened out of their wits but then they got used to him and became friendly. Some of us sailors are rotters, though. They'd purposely play some trick in front of him so's to get two rubles for a

new cap which only cost twenty kopeks. The commander twigged, though, and began to cut down the reward. When he'd beat it down to fifty kopeks they stopped playing the fool.

They say his hot temper got him into trouble once and he manhandled a sailor. Killed him or crippled him, I'm not sure which.... Ever since then he was afraid he would lose his temper and do something again. He knew his business all right. He'd come out on the bridge and just take a sniff at the air, look at the sea and the sky and tell at once the kind of weather we were going to have. Brave man he was, too. Sailed pretty near the wind. Used to wake the crew at night and send them all aloft to furl. Once he got us out of our hammocks. My station was on the main-topgallant yard. It was blowing a terrific gale. Our cruiser was running before the wind. It was pitch-dark. Raining cats and dogs. Cold. Sea roaring. Wind howling and whistling in the rigging, as if it would tear the flesh off your bones. You had to hold tight, and keep pretty wide awake, otherwise you were done for! If you hit the deck from that height there'd be nothing left of you to pick up. And if you went overboard you were as good as dead. But I wasn't a bit afraid. I just didn't feel anything. Worked by force of habit—with my hands, legs, teeth. My finger-nails turned up. A rope or a bit of canvas would give me a whack across the face. But I didn't notice these things. My heart was all afire. It wasn't until I got down on deck that I came to myself with a shock of surprise.

What we didn't go through!

Well, we came to Kronstadt. Exams started. I reeled off the answers to all the questions like a regular preacher. I was promoted to quartermaster. Service became easier. I sent my Nastya some foreign presents. She was very glad and wrote that she could hardly wait for me to come home.

The cruise was over. We moved into barracks. Our surgeon was transferred to another ship. I was sorry to part with him. He was very nice to the last, may God send him good health, and we parted warmly.

"Well, Nikanor," he says, "give me the smoke-lamp, will you. I'll light up my good old pipe. Bought it at Perim. Wouldn't lose it for the world. Confound the thing, it doesn't draw. The tobacco must be damp...."

Once, my lads, I read all about microbes in a book. They're sort of tiny creatures, a hundred times smaller than a nit for all I know. You can only see them through a microscope. That's an instrument with a magnifying glass. Now I was dying to get a peep into that microscope with my own eyes. I'll have my way as true as I live, I says to myself. Well and good. So I started to make enquiries of fellows in the know. After a good deal of trouble I ran into the helmsman. He had been studying for a navigating officer before he entered the service.

"Ask the students," he says.

"How come they to have microscopes?" I says. Back in our village, Prosyanaya Polyana, we had nicknamed a thief the Student. But all he had in his pocket was nails to pick locks with.

But then the helmsman put me wise about those students. Why, damn it all, they were the brainiest fellows going, it seems. Well then. I got leave and off I went to St. Petersburg. Walked about the streets. It was winter. The frost nipped your face red. Crowds of people. Every now and then a student would turn up. I put my case to one of them. He just burst out laughing and walked away. I spat after him. Went up to another.

"I'm studying history," he says, "and have nothing to do with microscopes."

It was annoying, but still I didn't give in. Came across another student, a little fellow with a hump. Poor, judging by his shabby clothes. Told him what I wanted. He

took it seriously, heard me out, asked me questions. Then he says:

"Unfortunately I have no microscope as I am studying law. But I have a friend who's studying to become a professor. He'll show you one."

Thank God it's coming out all right, I thought.

We arrived at the place where that learned man lived. It was a long narrow room full of shelves with little jars and books on them. There were books on the table and chairs as well. Some of them open. You couldn't have read them all in a lifetime!

The learned man himself was tall and skinny. Long thin legs, stuck apart like a pair of compasses. A big head with hair combed back, bald at the temples. Horn-rimmed spectacles on his nose. Dressed plainly. What struck me most about him was his forehead. About seven inches high, at least. You could tell at once he was a master head!

Frankly, I was a bit flustered when I saw him. I drew myself up stiff at attention.

"Let me introduce you—an interesting specimen," my friend the student said with a smile, and told him what I wanted.

"So you want to look into a microscope?" the learned man said.

"Yes, Your Honour, I'd very much like to," I answered.

He went red and frowned. Hullo, I thought, have I put my foot in it? Maybe he's a general by rank? He wiped his spectacles with a handkerchief, blinked his eyes, then looked at me steady-like.

"Sit down, take a chair..." he says to me kindly. "You shouldn't give me high titles."

"How then, sir?"

"Simply call me Vasili Ivanovich."

Seeing what a kind, pleasant man he was, I plucked up courage. We had a little chat. Then the professor puts a

little apparatus on the table—the microscope. When he'd got it all set, I looked in it.

You could have knocked me down with a feather! It was wonderful, my lads! A tiny drop of water became the size of an apple with at least fifty microbes in it. All alive and swarming. You'd never believe it. And Vasili Ivanovich kept explaining things to me and showing me other varieties. He reared those microbes himself, he did. Just like a wizard. Some of them were infectious. If they got inside of you you could count yourself out.

I spent more than an hour looking at them.

When we'd done with the microscope we cracked a bottle of vodka between us, with a bit of cheese and sausage for a snack, and parted the best of friends.

It all seems like a dream to me now.

Yes, it takes all sorts to make a world! There's Vasili Ivanovich, for instance. He's studying to become a professor; God knows the students are brainy enough, but he's going to teach them. Could you beat that? And the way he treated me—just like a comrade, without ceremony. There....

I spent the whole winter in barracks. In my free time I went in for reading. I wanted to puzzle out the real meaning of life for myself. And I was getting on like a house on fire—my head swelled like an old barrel that needed coopering.

In the summer I was transferred to a gunboat. We filled up with stores and went off again on a foreign cruise. This time we made a longer run. Called at new places, saw new wonders of the world. And my interest in things kept growing all the time.

We'd be going along at night. Pitch dark. Not a living soul around. Nothing but the sea. It seems as if our ship is the only thing in the world. Gives you a kind of creepy feeling. And suddenly, far, far away, a faint light begins to gleam. It turns out to be a lighthouse. Shoots its beams

into the black waste of the sea, setting your mind at ease, as if to say: "Don't worry. You're on a true course. . . ."

You feel happier straight away.

Sometimes you come across a rock, tall and brown, all covered with cracks. Foamy waves splashing around it as if telling it a story. And there it stands, just like a sentry at his post, all alone in the middle of the sea, watching the passing ships.

Our ship wandered about the Mediterranean all the autumn, and in the winter we headed out for the Indian Ocean.

We passed through the Suez Canal. Wonderful canal, that, my lads. It's a hundred miles long, and connects two seas. The African coast has thin brush and reeds growing on it, but the Asiatic shore is bare. All you can see are the yellow sands of the desert, stretching all the way to the horizon. The things people invent, my God! Fancy digging such a tremendous canal!

We entered the Red Sea. Why it's called that I just can't say. Its colour isn't red at all, but blue, just like the sky. That's the sea Moses led the Israelites across, you know. I had been told there were Pharaoh's Rats in it—monsters with human heads and fish tails. But that's just nonsense. . . .

It kept getting hotter. By the time we entered the Indian Ocean and approached the Equator it was about as much as we could stand. We had the awnings up over the deck and the bridge. Went about with practically nothing on. But it didn't help. I felt like tearing the skin off my body. Kept dousing ourselves with sea-water all the time. Had no fresh food. They fed us salt junk, sour cabbage and hard tack. The fresh water was warm and sickening—they diluted it with red wine to make it drinkable. As for the stokers and enginemen, hot was no name for it down below. We often dragged 'em out on the upper deck in a dead faint, limp as a stewed turnip.

It was a fine sight, though. A dead calm, not a spot of cloud in the sky. The ocean lay sweltering in the blazing sun without a ripple on it. Looked like an immense sheet of blue polished glass with golden gleaming bits of sun scattered over it. Once in a while you'd get a capful of wind, and the sea would dimple as if it were being tickled. Sometimes flying fish, just like the sparrows back home, would shoot out of the water with a gleam of silvery scales. A white albatross would sweep across the sky. It's a big bird, that. Likes plenty of space and freedom. Very often sharks would follow the ship, and their pilot would be escorted like an admiral by his flag-officers. They're not squeamish about eating human flesh, those brutes. A very dangerous fish for the seaman.

Once we caught one of the blighters! The enginemen made a fish-hook as thick as your arm, baited it with a great chunk of salt meat and dropped it over the side. That fool fish swallowed the bait, hook and all. We hauled her out on the poop deck. She was a whopper, nearly twelve feet long. Didn't like being on deck—struggled like mad to get away, but we kept hitting her over the head with a tommy-bar. Took some killing, the blighter! Then we chopped her in halves, and the two halves twitched and jiggled. The heart was still beating when we got it out—lay there on the deck like a live thing. Gave you the creeps....

Up comes the signal-man.

"She's got pretty sharp teeth!" he says.

Being used to artificial eyes—binoculars and telescopes—he didn't trust his own. Wanted to get the feel of it, too. He shoved his hand into the open jaws, and that shark just clamped down on it with a snap. Hand was left dangling on its veins. Afterwards the surgeon hacked it off up to the elbow. Got his walking ticket, went home. The dolphins are mischievous creatures too, for that matter. They like to follow a ship and put on all kinds of

funny shows. They'll line up like sailors at drill, then, as if at a command, off they go, hitting the breeze, as much as to say: "Look at us! That's what we call gymnastics!"

Getting fed up with that, they'll start giving you slapstick stuff, each one doing tricks on his own. One'll roll over on his back and swim upside down, another'll turn somersaults, a third'll start shying fish about. And at night, when they start frisking and splashing about on both sides of the ship, it's still better: the water sparkles in the dark, just like sulphur burning with a shower of blue sparks. It's so beautiful you can't tear your eyes away from it.

I love the dark tropical nights, boys. I'd be lying on the after bridge stark naked, watching the westering sun burning down. It's warm, quiet. The ship runs smooth and steady. The crew's asleep. It gets darker and darker. The sea's black as pitch. Astern the water swirls and glows. Aloft the stars are shining, big and brilliant. In the middle of the sky flows the Milky Way, just like a river studded with gold. The motion of the ship raises a balmy breeze that caresses my body lovingly, just like a mother her child.

"My God, it's grand!" you whisper to yourself, while tears roll down your cheeks. Tears of joy, naturally.... You love the whole world then—the stars, the sea, every little fish, and tiny insect, and leaf, and most of all—man!

Ahead of you the running lights of a ship come into view, like two eyes of different colour—one red, the other green. Some steam vessel heading the other way. We'd speak each other, and pass on, and I'd wish her from the bottom of my heart, "A fair wind...."

And you go to sleep with kindly thoughts. If you're off duty, you sleep untroubled till the morning, when you hear the command, "Hit the deck! Up all hammocks!"

You find the sun up, fresh and glowing, as if it had had a dip in the sea. We make towards it, and it beams at us, painting the sea and our faces a rosy colour.

The bright nights are fine, too. Sometimes the moon stands right overhead. The small stars fade out, leaving only the big ones. The boat covers stand out whitely, and the brass ventilator cowls gleam. The sea is flooded with moonlight and looks whitish, as if it had been diluted with milk. You can see far around you. Sometimes, when I'm standing watch, I go wool-gathering. My mind runs on Nastya. I dress her up in silks, deck her out in gems. Take her for a stroll in a tropical garden. It has the most wonderful trees. Birds singing everywhere. And the whole place is drowned in flowers, drenched with sunshine. Fishes frisk about in little ponds. Nastya snuggles up to me with words of love. And it's all so real....

Ah, those tropical nights! They play devilish tricks with a man's fancy!

Sometimes you think of your home village, Prosyanaya Polyana, and you could almost cry for pity. It stands in a forest, snowed right under. People there live in ignorance and darkness, listening to the howling blizzard in winter, struggling with poverty, dying in poverty. They'll never know how big the world is, who peoples it, what seas there are....

Ah, the less said about that the better.

We touched at Ceylon. There we received orders from St. Petersburg to return to Russia.

I forgot to tell you, lads—you've got to be careful the way you handle the officers, otherwise you're done for. I don't want to boast, but I always managed to get along with them. They never know what to make of me, but I can see right through them. I know every man inside out—what temper this one has, whether that one knows his business, or just talks big. When a new officer joins the ship I try to size him up straight away. It's important

to get his proper measure, so's you can keep on the right side of him and not put your foot in it. There are all kinds, you know. One likes to be addressed a rank above what he really is, another likes you to ask him about everything. Sometimes one of them would try to pump me. I'd spin him such a yarn the devil himself couldn't make head or tail of it. One day, though, I came it so thick that I nearly dropped the killick.

Our chief officer on the gunboat was Lieutenant Krasnov, a fat stubby man, like a mortar; had a big moustache, sticking out like a jib-boom, and rheumy eyes. He was considered something of a crank. Used to call every sailor Johnny, and the sailors called him by that name too. He was a holy terror to the crew. And when he'd had a drop too much he'd go about the ship, yelling, "I'm the Chinese Emperor!" Fall on everyone's neck. "With brave fellows like you," he says, "I'll smash all the nations to smithereens."

One day I saw a pair of bull's horns knocking about in the forecastle. They were fine big horns, but had nothing to do in a ship. So I threw them overboard. But it turned out that the chief officer had given them to the carpenter to trim up. He got to know what I'd done and semaphored me up with his finger.

"Hi, Johnny, come over here!"

I goes up.

"Did you throw the horns overboard?"

"Yes, sir. They were out of place, sir."

"How dare you!" he interrupts me. "Don't you realize they were my horns?"

And I goes and blurts out:

"Sorry, sir, I thought they were a bull's."

He was struck all of a heap and stared at me with his mouth open. It was full of gold teeth. I got it hot. The worst was he had his needle in for me ever afterwards. Kept threatening me, "I'll work you up, Grachov!"

It would have gone bad with me if he hadn't shot himself soon afterwards. His servant told us his wife had gone off with some rich fellow, and so he committed suicide....

After our second foreign cruise I was promoted boatswain's mate. Service became still easier. I've been sailing in this battleship ever since. I spend four months every summer afloat, and the winter ashore.

"Someone hand me over that smoke-lamp, will you. I'll have another smoke. There...."

At one time Nastya went clean out of my head. It was like this.

One day, a Sunday it was, I had to take the officers ashore. I landed them on the quay and took the steam launch back to the ship. She was lying in the outer roadstead. I was the coxswain then. The sun was shining, but the breeze suddenly started to freshen. A black cloud moved up from the east and covered half the sky. The wind kept strengthening, drove the cloud swiftly towards us. The sea-gulls were flying about restlessly, crying. A gale coming on, I thought. And I wasn't mistaken. We had no sooner left the harbour than a squall started blowing. Sea got all foamy. The uproar was terrific, like a thousand trumpets blaring away together. The swirling sea tossed the waves high and dashed them down in a million sprays. The cloud was now overhead. Reeking as if the sky was on fire. The sun was hidden. The sea grew dark. White waves raced along like mad, tumbling over one another.... Thunder, lightning. And the wind getting wilder all the time. It started to rain. Could hardly see a thing ahead of you. We had more than a mile to go yet.

Suddenly, on the port beam, I see a little skiff tossing about. A woman sitting aft, and a man at the oars. Pulling away with all his might. But the wind drove her farther and farther out to sea. The skiff reared one minute, then plunged nose down the next. She couldn't ride

out that storm. At any moment she'd turn turtle. I put the helm hard over to port and made for the skiff at full speed. When I got near, I eased up a bit. The young lady was white as a ghost. She was drenching wet, shouting something or other. All of a sudden the skiff was tossed up on the crest of a wave and then capsized. The man clutched the keel. The young lady was flung aside. Struggling in the water, with the waves dashing over her head. I caught my breath. Shouted to the men in the bow, "Stand by with the hook!"

And I steered the launch past the young lady so's to keep her to leeward. Instead of holding out the boat-hook for her to catch it, one of the sailors caught her shoulder and tore her dress. You could see the scratch on her bare body. I dropped the wheel, leaned over the side, and caught her by the hair. Snatched her out of the sea in a trice. Then we saved the boatman, took his craft in tow and went back to the harbour.

The young lady was shivering and crying, coughing up salt water. Couldn't say a word. The boatman was first to come round.

"Well, you see, I took her out for a run—the young lady I mean. Everything was all right, you know. She even piped up a song, she did. And then this upset goes and happens. Much obliged for saving us, I'm sure. You'll have one on me as soon as I get my money. The young lady here owes me some."

"What for?" I asked him.

"The fare, you know. A ruble fifty, that was the bargain we struck. Well, I didn't bring her back, that's true. But it's not my fault, is it?"

A silly ass, that fellow was. And talk about being greedy!

We put the young lady ashore and sent her home in a cab.

Shortly afterwards I got a medal for life-saving, and the captain thanked me in front of the whole company.

Although I hadn't earned it I couldn't very well refuse the reward. Afterwards I got a letter from the young lady. Clever bit of writing. Asked me to come and see her.

They welcomed me like one of the family. The young lady's name was Olga Petrovna. Her father, a doctor, was dead. She had an old mother and a brother, a schoolboy of twelve. They were not badly off, by the looks of it. Had several rooms, a grand piano, soft armchairs, portraits on the walls.

Olga Petrovna was a delicate girl, rather small, but very sweet. A blonde with dimpled cheeks, and grey eyes full of mirth. Lots of fluffy hair. A clear ringing voice like a quail's.

After the cruise I was a pretty frequent visitor there. Whenever I could get away from the barracks I used to go straight there. We'd sit drinking tea and I'd listen to interesting talk. Sometimes Olga Petrovna would play the piano. I kept asking her all kinds of questions, mostly in the scientific line. She was wonderful at explaining things. Highly educated. Sometimes I'd begin to spin her a yarn about ship life—what we did on board ship, how we sailed the different seas, what we saw.

"Ah, Nikanor Matveyevich, how interesting that is!" she'd cry delightedly, and caress you with her eyes.

She was very nice to me. Her mother and brother were friendly, too, I sort of became one of the family.

I could have gone on visiting her, doing my soul a world of good, but no, some devil got into me and tripped me up. The long and short of it was I fell head over heels in love with her. You couldn't blame me either! She was the most fascinating girl you'd ever seen. Her eyes, and her sweet little smiles were simply bewitching. When she spoke it was like a bobolink twittering. Called me "dear," "my dear friend." Or else we'd sit side by side and she'd start reading to me out of a book or explaining something, while her hair touched my face. Well, naturally, I'd go hot

all over and my head would start spinning like a top. Sometimes she'd say with a laugh: "You have the tang of the sea about you, Nikanor Matveyevich. . . ."

"How's one to understand that?" I says.

"In a good sense, of course," she says.

Well, taking one thing with another, it looked as if she cared for me, too. That set me thinking. What was to be done? Sometimes, if I missed a day or two going there, I'd be as miserable as a funeral, but when I saw her it only made me feel worse. Once it gets started, my heart plays the devil with me, you know. I began to pine away. My face turned from black to green. I got thin and hollow-eyed. My shipmates got to know about it, and started to rag me.

"Look here, Grachov, you'd better backwater! You don't think a young lady like that is going to fall for a fellow with such an ugly mug! You might as well try to climb higher than the truck."

But I felt that I couldn't give her up. She had got into my blood somehow. She had moored my heart with steel cables.

Why shouldn't she marry me, I thought. Would anybody love her more than I did? Uneducated? She'd teach me. Our children would go to college. . . .

The Christmas holidays came round. I couldn't stand it any longer. I felt real desperate.

Made up my mind to have the thing out. But how? What could I say? She wasn't Nastya. You couldn't board her like a ship, or squeeze her up against a wattle fence. You had to feel your ground with her.

I happened to read a novel about a lawyer's love affair. Aha, I thought, so that's the way to go about it! All right. I didn't sleep for several nights, thinking how best to approach Olga Petrovna and what to say to her.

On Christmas Day I had a shave and clean up and turned out in square rig. I went off to see her. Opened the

door. Wished her a merry Christmas. She looked at me and said surprised:

"What's the matter with you, Nikanor Matveyevich?"

"Nothing, Olga Petrovna."

"Are you ill?"

"No, thank God."

She was worried about me. Gave me a powder, and advised me to go and see a doctor. Tried to cheer me up. But it didn't help. I was in an agony of mind. Her mother and brother had gone to St. Petersburg. Here was a chance of getting the thing off my chest, but I didn't have the nerve. I sat on for a while, then went away.

Didn't sleep again all night. The next day I was sort of crazy. When I came to see Olga Petrovna she got a scare.

"You have a wild look in your eyes..." she says.

Started questioning me, wanted to find out what it was all about. But I avoided her questions.

"Better play something," I said to her.

She sat down at the piano and touched the keys. The strings began to sob. A sad song, it was.... Without words, but I felt as if it had been written specially for me. It went straight to my heart, and I couldn't fight the tears back. Bent my head down. Olga Petrovna comes up, puts her hand on my shoulder and asks sympathetically:

"You are crying, I believe?"

I wanted to tell her everything, but my mind was just a blank. I couldn't think of a word to say. All I did was to shake my empty noddle, just like a horse trying to keep the gadflies off.

"What is the matter with you?" she kept asking me. "For God's sake, tell me...."

I blurted out the first thing that came to my tongue.

"Without you I'm like a ship without a compass. I can't stand it any more."

"What do you mean?" she says.

At this point I should have knelt down and kissed her slender fingers, the way the novel said. It might have worked. But like the confounded ass I was, I had to go and hug her, kissed her right on the lips.

She wrenched loose and crouched in a corner. All white and quivering, with enormous eyes. Clutched her head, and whispered:

"Go away.... I loved you as my rescuer, loved you as a brother. And this is what you are...."

I saw it all. My heart sank. I picked up my cap, turned sixteen points together, and staggered off to the depot. Walked down the street like a drunken man. Chucked that damned life-saving medal away. Now I'm done for, I thought. I felt so rotten I could have laid me down and died.

Someone gripped me by the shoulder.

I look up. It's the commodore. Picking at me.

"Here am I shouting 'Stop,' and you take no notice!"

"Sorry, sir."

"Why are you holding your cap? Why don't you salute? Are you drunk?"

"Yes, sir, had a drop...."

That evening found me in the lock-up. I got five days under arrest. That's when I started having visions. I don't remember what happened after that. Came to myself in hospital three weeks later. Fever. Had it bad.

When I came out of the hospital I went home on leave. Took up again with Nastya. That cured me like magic. A hair of the dog, you know. This time I went the whole hog with her, though.... A son was born. But that's good luck. I'll cover up the sin by marriage....

Yes, that's how it is....

Oho! Bells striking twelve.

At four we go on the watch. Time to turn in, boys. We'll go on with this talk some other time.

1912

THE SURPRISE GIFT

THE white stone buildings of the seaport stood out vividly in the slanting beams of the westering sun, which gilded the sandy foreshore and awakened a sparkle on the smooth placid immensity of the sea. The clear sky, looking as though it had been thoroughly swabbed, was a delicate blue, fringed in the west by streaky clouds that hung low over the earth. The horizon seemed to have been shouldered out of the way. A naval squadron lay in the roads, wreathed in a mist of smoke. Several merchantmen and fishing smacks lay moored to buoys.

The heat dropped and the shadows lengthened. Idlers sauntered down to the sea-shore for a breath of fresh air.

Seven sailors, wearing white regulation shirts and black trousers, stood around a small booth next to the wooden jetty. They were rowers off the six-oar, buying buns, honey-cakes and lemonade, and flirting with the saucy round-faced shop-woman. A fat policeman with a faint grin on his face stood leaning against a lamppost near by.

"I'd do anything to oblige you boys!" the woman was saying, winking archly at the sailors and going off into a fit of laughter.

"Now would you?"

"I mean it," she said. "Sailors are my weakness. . . ."

"Here's a lively piece for you!" one man said admiringly.

"Hot stuff!" another added.

There followed a burst of laughter, which had in it the rollicking zest of youth.

Dubov, the coxswain, a man of elephantine clumsiness with oblique eyes in a fleshy face, glanced at his watch and said peremptorily, "Time to get back to the ship."

The sailors trailed down to the jetty reluctantly, and kept looking back to exchange banter with the shopwoman.

"Get a move on, there! Stop that jabbering!" the coxswain shouted.

Just then a young woman, gingerly holding a basket, came up to the sailors. Her slim frail figure was prettily set off by a white blouse and black skirt. Her fashionable hat with an ostrich feather and her dainty shoes were both noticeably the worse for wear. The fair curls showing through the heavy veil gave added charm to her pale face, which had fine chiselled features. Her large emerald-green eyes betrayed obvious agitation.

"Are you off the cruiser *Lightning*?" she asked the sailors, peering at the inscriptions on their cap bands.

"Yes, miss," the coxswain answered, stepping forward.

"Do you know Midshipman Petrov?"

"Why, sure, miss. He's one of our officers."

"Well, he's my brother."

Dubov touched his cap and the crew drew themselves up.

The young woman glanced uneasily at the policeman. He still stood there, leaning against the lamppost as if he were glued to it, and gazing meditatively into the blue distance where some ship was standing in for an anchorage.

"Will you please give him this basket," she said. "Only be very careful, it's got delicate things in it. If anything happens to them, my brother will punish you."

Her demure shrinking manner reminded one of a cat plotting mischief under its mistress's eye. Anyone would have noticed that, but the sailors were so fascinated by her charm and the ripple of her pretty voice that they had eyes for nothing else.

"You needn't worry, miss," said Dubov, and the woman, handing him a small sealed envelope, added, "And give this letter to Petrov, too."

"Very good, miss!"

The woman hurried away.

The sailors carefully set the basket aft, took their places in the boat and shoved off. Their arms were bare, revealing strong supple muscles. The rowers bent to it with long steady strokes, and the oars rose and fell like the wings of some great bird. The rowlocks creaked, the salt water splashed lazily. The six-oar skimmed over the glassy plain, leaving two ridges of foam in her wake. The sun slipped behind a strip of lavender-tinted cloud and gilded its edges, and the shadow darkened the gleaming surface of the sea. In a few minutes the sun reappeared, bright as ever, flooding the world in its generous rays. Launches raced towards the jetty one after another, carrying clerks going for the evening mail. Gay shouts and laughter sounded from a yawl leaving the harbour with a load of smartly dressed boys and girls.

The six-oar stood for the offing.

"My word, what a girl!" the coxswain said dreamily, sitting at the rudder. "A regular peach."

After a moment's reflection he glanced at the basket, and said, "I wonder what it can be?"

"Didn't she say something about delicate?" one of the oarsmen said.

"That's just it."

"I bet you it's china-ware. Nick-nacks, you know—naked women, little dogs and things. The table in Mr. Petrov's cabin is full of them gadgets."

"No, you're wrong," another said. "She meant delicatessen. A kind of food, that is. I used to eat the stuff myself when I was officer's servant. It's made of cream, chocolate, liqueur and other odds and ends. After eating it you belch sweets for two days."

"What do you know!" Dubov said sarcastically. "You've been in the navy three years and haven't learnt a darned thing yet."

The sailors argued the point, then fell to discussing the shop-woman. In coming alongside the cruiser the six-oar bumped against the accommodation-ladder. An odd sound issued from the basket. The sailors stared at it dumbfounded.

"Shake a leg, there!" the watch officer on the cruiser shouted, leaning over the side.

"Something's moaning in there, sir," the coxswain stammered.

"Who's moaning, where?"

"In the basket."

"What the devil have you got there?"

"Something delicate, sir."

"What?"

"I don't know. But it's something alive, I think."

"You're a fool! Bring it up here, we'll have a look at it."

Dubov picked the basket up and, holding it out carefully in front of him, ascended to the deck. The queer sounds grew more audible. The watch officer's curiosity was aroused and he ordered the basket to be opened at once. Smelling a rat, the young navigation officer, who was a great wag, ran into the wardroom.

"Gentlemen, come up on the quarter-deck!" he announced for all to hear. "You'll see a sight."

The officers tumbled out onto the upper deck with noise and laughter. The sailors came running aft. All crowded round the basket in a circle, peering eagerly towards the centre. All one could see there was the bent back of a sailor. At last Dubov—it was he—straightened up, holding in his broad hands a two- or three-month-old baby, barely covered with a white napkin.

"It's a boy, sir!" he announced loudly.

The baby, its eyes closed, began to wriggle and make sucking noises with its toothless mouth. Exclamations and suppressed laughter were heard among the officers and the crew.

"Who brought that here?" the chief officer demanded, pushing his way into the middle of the circle. He was frowning; his big iron-grey moustaches twitched angrily.

"I did, sir!" Dubov reported, holding the baby gingerly in his outstretched arms.

"What for?"

"Some young lady sent it . . . to Mr. Petrov. I have a letter for him, too."

There was a startled silence. Hundreds of eyes were trained on Midshipman Petrov, who was standing there with the rest of the officers. Immaculate and well-groomed, in a snow-white summer uniform, with proudly poised head and black curled little moustache in a debonair smiling face, he had, in an instant, gone deathly pale, as if all the blood had drained from his face. The next moment an ugly grimace distorted it. Quickly, with a reeling gait, he walked to his cabin, muttering as if he were drunk:

"What a beastly thing to do. . . . The police ought to be told. I had nothing to do with it."

The baby pulled a face, sneezed twice, and then, as if realizing how shabbily fate was serving it, began to squall at the top of its voice.

"Fancy walking out on his own flesh and blood!" one of the sailors said, voicing the thoughts of many.

"We've got an addition to the crew, thank God!" another said with a merry laugh.

The officers stood looking at each other in embarrassed silence.

The watch officer dismissed the sailors, then turned to the chief officer, saying: "What are we going to do with the baby?"

"I don't know myself," the latter answered, shrugging his shoulders. "It's up to the commander. I'll go and report."

He went away.

The huge purple sun was sinking slowly. The streaky clouds blazed up. The town, the outskirts with their green patches of woodland, the shores, the level plain of the sea —all were a welter of crimson. Not a breath stirred the air. A deep solemn stillness reigned, broken only by the cry of the baby.

The young officers stood whispering among themselves.

"I know the girl," one of them said. He was a thin, sharp-nosed man with a long neck like a goose's. "Most attractive! To be sure, she's not the intellectual sort, but then what ankles, what a bud of a mouth! Simply stunning!"

The chief officer returned to the quarter-deck and passed on to the watch officer the commander's order to have the baby sent to the police-station.

"Wow . . . wow. . ." the baby cried piteously, as though begging for mercy, while Dubov sedulously rocked it in his arms.

At that moment boatswain Gruzdev, who had not taken his keen grey eyes off the infant all the time, stepped forward. He was a strong, sinewy man of about forty, hard as nails. His bronzed, scarred face was covered with a fine web of wrinkles and stiff bristly hair, which gave it a rough-hewn appearance. He was a tough brave seaman, ever active and driving, who cursed offenders in the

choicest language and used his fists pretty freely. At the moment he looked more ferocious than ever, as, sticking out his broad chest, he saluted the chief officer and said gruffly:

"Please sir, may I keep the baby?"

"What for?" the chief officer said in surprise.

"I'll nurse him and bring him up. I have none of my own. He'll be a son to me."

"Are you trying to pull my leg?"

Gruzdev, obviously agitated, was breathing hard, and his broad nostrils quivered. Raising his voice, he pleaded:

"I mean it seriously, sir. Give me the baby.... What will the police do with it? They'll just hand it over to some foundling-hospital, poor thing. It's a shame. I'll make a man of him."

The napkin got into the baby's mouth. It stopped crying and began sucking it. Its dark bright eyes were open and glistening tears hung quivering like dew-drops on its long eyelashes.

"It *is* a shame. After all it's a living creature," the chief officer said, his voice softening as he glanced at the baby. Suddenly a gentle smile lit up his face. "Ah, well, if you want it that bad, take it. Will three days be enough for you to take it down to your wife?"

"Yessir."

"All right, I'll ask the commander to grant you leave."

"Thank you very much, sir!" Gruzdev answered joyfully.

He took the child from Dubov—it had started to cry again—and hurried aft with it, murmuring:

"Hush, little one, hush.... A sailor mustn't cry. We'll have supper in a minute."

"So you've come by a son, bos'un?" the sailors said jokingly.

"Yes, boys. I've got a son now."

A minute later the boatswain was locked in his little berth with a bottle of milk he had got from the officers' cook. Next to him stood the basket. The baby lay on his knees sucking the milk greedily with its rosebud of a mouth, its black eyes curiously examining the strange face bent over it.

"Are you as hungry as all that, poor little orphan? Never mind, eat and grow up big and strong. We'll be good friends. I'll call you Dmitry, just Mitya. . . ."

Gruzdev kissed the baby's forehead and smiled at it. His grey eyes with the tracing of lines about them shone with a warm and tender light. He went on in a low rumbling voice, like a contented bear:

"When you grow up we'll go off on a voyage together round the world. Ah, baby swallow, what marvels I'll show you! We'll have a grand time! I'll teach you seafaring, too. If you don't want to be a seaman, I'll send you to learn. I've got four hundred laid by. And I'll have saved up a bit more by then. I'll make an educated man of you."

After feeding the baby, the boatswain laid it on his bunk, and, switching on the electric light, he knelt down beside it. The almost naked baby lay wriggling its arms and legs.

"Look at that! Why, you're a first-class athlete! Well done, Mitya!"

The child looked so sweet there, just like a budding flower. The boatswain feasted his eyes on it until he was called up on deck.

The afterglow of sunset slowly faded from the sky, which was spangled with brilliant stars, as if up there, under that vast canopy, preparations for some grand fête were going on. The sea breathed a bracing freshness. The lights of the ships quivered in the dark mirror of its surface. On board the cruiser the bell was struck. From somewhere far away came answering strokes, as if the ships

were holding a roll-call. The cheerful bell-notes awoke the sleeping echoes of the night and melted into the vastness of the sea.

The boatswain with the baby in his arms descended the ladder into the steam launch. No one had ever seen him in such high spirits.

"Imagine how glad my missus will be to get such a surprise gift," the boatswain said to the man at the rudder on a sudden joyous impulse. The latter called down to the engine: "Ahead!"

The launch suddenly came alive with a hiss, and aquiver. Cleaving the water, she sped swiftly towards the town, which lay bathed in lights.

1912

SEDITION APPROVED

AUTUMN night, dark and cold, looked in at the windows of the naval depot. The wind whined tediously, like a starving beggar woman, and pelted the window-panes with raindrops, as though resenting the fact that the gas-brackets burned so brightly and warmly within the whitewashed rooms of that long brick building.

No one cared to go up to town in such weather, and so the sailors, feeling bored, were sitting about on their grey-blanketed cots, drinking tea, exchanging good-humoured banter, reading or drifting from one room to another, looking up friends and acquaintances. Some old salt would be yarning about his adventures on the high seas and the wonderful tropical countries he had been to with a masterly blend of fact and fiction that held the young men spellbound.

The air had that peculiar smell common to all barracks.

In one of the rooms, Dmitry Bragin, Petty Officer Ist Class, was squatting before his open box, thumbing through a thick newly-cut book. He scanned the pages with weak-sighted little eyes, his big round head doggedly bent and black eyebrows drawn together in a frown.

He always kept to himself and was considered a dark horse among the ship's company. If any sailor abused the men in authority, he would say, "Pipe down there, old chap!"

"Why?" the man would ask.

"All authority is God-sent."

"How do you know?"

"That's what the Holy Fathers tell us," Bragin would answer with a look that was at once mocking and provocative.

Sometimes he would fish a Bible out of his box, seemingly anxious to find passages that would lend support to his ideas, but those he read out always proved the opposite.

"That's not it," he would break off, putting the Bible away. "I forget now where those words about the powers that be are mentioned. I'll find the place afterwards."

At the same time he was looked upon by his superiors as an exemplary officer who knew his business, performed his duties well and attended church regularly.

Opinion regarding him was divided.

"I can't make him out. Either he's smart as they make 'em, or just an empty noddle."

"He only looks a prize sap, but his head's screwed on the right way."

Leafing through the book, Bragin suddenly beamed, pleased as Punch.

"Could you beat that!" he cried, giving the book a smack.

"What's the matter?" the sailors asked him.

"Oh, nothing. I picked up a good book. I'll read it out after the whistle. You've never heard anything like it in all your born days."

Bragin's box was chock-full of books, which included Buchner's *Power and Matter*, a *Menology*, a Bible,

the works of Strauss, and Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. The lid of the box had pictures of saints pasted all over it.

"The money you must have thrown away on all that junk! A fat lot of good it does you," a topman said, yawning fit to dislocate his jaws.

"Anyone can see with half an eye that you're not of the all-there kind. You wouldn't talk the way you do if you were."

"And you're all there, I suppose?"

"You bet. It takes a lot to fool me."

"Line up!" commanded the duty officer, blowing his pipe.

When the roll-call was over and evening prayers sung, the sailors pressed round Bragin, begging, "Come on, old chap, the public's waiting!"

"You won't be disappointed," Bragin answered, getting the book out from under his pillow.

He read standing up, taking his time. Although he started off somewhat falteringly, his voice grew stronger as he went along. His lean face was as grave as that of a preacher.

The sailors, of whom quite a crowd had collected, hung on his lips with a vague sense of uneasiness. And no wonder. The book sharply criticized the tsarist government, made cruel fun of police-ridden religion, and lashed the priests with such withering scorn that the very fur seemed to fly. The men heard new startling words they had never heard before, words which, like sledge-hammers, smashed up all established notions. The light of profound thought flooded men's minds and they flinched, thrilled by the dazzling apparition of truth revealed to them for the first time.

"I say, drop that! You'll be jailed. You can't read stuff like that in public," Bragin's friends warned and nudged him.

"Leave me alone!" Bragin answered sharply, surveying his audience with a look of triumph and wiping his perspiring face with the sleeve of his jacket.

"He's making it up out of his head," a voice in the crowd shouted during the pause.

"Come up and have a look!"

Several men shouldered their way forward and looked at the book with curiosity, feeling it with their hands and struggling for its possession.

"Sling your hook!" others shouted to them.

"Go on reading!" impatient voices rose in an uproar.

Bragin swung himself up on a cupboard so that all could see him, and went on reading with still greater ardour.

The sailors, all eyes and ears, drew closer around him. Their curiosity grew with each page. The invisible spirit of genius, acting through the medium of the reader's voice, cast a spell upon the audience. It seemed to them as though truth's golden sunbeam burst in upon their ugly sombre lives, illumining the abyss of human lies and vices.

"There's a book for you!" an occasional exclamation broke from the crowd.

"A real eye-opener!"

"Some books look all right, but they're such headachy stuff you'd think a druggist wrote them," a rumbling bass said admiringly. "But in this one everything's clear as a pikestaff."

"Oh, shut up, can't you!" came angry voices.

The sergeant-major, nicknamed Baboon on account of his ugly face, came up unobserved. He stood listening with one ear turned in Bragin's direction. After a minute or two, his head went up with a jerk, and he stared at Bragin as if he were a monster. Suddenly he rushed up to him, waving his arms wildly.

"Stop! Stop it, you son of a bitch! It's a forbidden book! I'll have you arrested! You're an agitator!"

Protesting voices rose among the crowd.

"Leave him alone. Let the man finish!"

"You'll go into that afterwards!"

"Go it, Mitya, fire away!"

The sailors formed a close ring round Bragin and kept the infuriated sergeant-major at bay.

Just then the duty officer entered the room. He was a thickset gentleman, rather rough in his treatment of the sailors at whom he was fond of shouting, but on the whole considered an easy-going forbearing officer.

" 'Tention!" the room orderly, contrary to the rules, yelled at the top of his voice. He was anxious to warn his comrades of the approaching danger.

The uproar died down immediately.

"What's this mob here?" the officer demanded.

"It's me, sir, I'm reading them this holy book," Bragin said, stepping forward. His voice assumed a meek, slightly singsong tone, and he threw into his face an expression of pious stupidity.

Baboon, who a moment before had shrunk behind the men's backs, came running up to the officer, shaking with terror and stammering:

"I had just come in, sir.... Then, after a bit, I began to have my doubts. There's something wrong about that book, sir, if you ask me...."

"Wait a minute, will you," the officer cut him short, and taking the book from Bragin he began to look through it.

All stood silent and gloomy, looking anxiously from the officer to Bragin and waiting for the storm to break. One thing they realized—their comrade was in for trouble, serious trouble, harsh and unrelenting as fate, but what no one suspected was that the book had been recommended by the authorities for the public libraries. It was a collection of tracts dealing with Lev Tolstoi's doctrines in the light of his excommunication, and contained, in addition to critical articles, long passages from some of the

author's banned writings. Bragin had taken advantage of this to read only Tolstoi, omitting the comments of his opponents.

There was a dead silence in the room, broken only by the tumult of the autumn night outside.

The officer returned the book to Bragin with an indulgent:

"You may continue reading! Good work. . . ."

"Thank you, sir!"

Addressing the room, the officer added:

"It'll do you blockheads good to listen attentively, because it's a good and instructive book! D'you hear?"

"Yessir!" several voices responded in a confused and feeble chorus.

"Well, what were you going to tell me?" the officer demanded, turning to the sergeant-major.

Baboon drew himself up, and peering insolently into the eyes of his superior officer, rapped out:

"That's just what I've been telling 'em here, sir. It's a book o' books. Most useful, too, tells you everything plain as can be, broadens your mind wonderful. As I was just saying, you couldn't find a better book if you searched the world."

"Well?" the officer said.

"But the men didn't agree with me. Kicked up a hell of a row."

The officer turned on his heel without saying another word and left the room.

The sailors stood open-mouthed, bewildered.

"Godless sinners, that's what you all are! You've forgotten the Holy Church!" Baboon shouted, and after exhausting his stock of invective, he hurried away to his office, wishing the earth would open and swallow him up.

1920

LOONY

I

THE gunboat *Zalyotnaya* was lying in the inner roads. He came on board after dinner, accompanied by the quartermaster, and immediately attracted the attention of the crew.

The sailors were drinking their tea in the warm spring sun, which was half-way down the sky. Snow-white clouds hung drowsily in the limpid blue. The sea, calm in the distance, lapped the iron hulls of the ships with make-believe affection. Harbour tugboats passed in and out, raising the waves, and row-boats and other light craft skimmed by. The air was filled with the hooting of steamers, the shouting of men and the shrill whistle of boatswain's pipes.

While waiting for the chief officer, to whom his papers had been sent in a sealed packet, the new arrival stood on the quarter-deck, a dismal slovenly figure dressed in a shabby regulation suit, his legs sagging at the knees and long skinny arms dangling at his sides. He was thin, but big-boned and wiry, with a swarthy face as flat as a board on which two useless tufts of cork-screw hair, doing duty for a beard, stood out ridiculously as if glued to his heavy jaw. His head, with a cap tilted back over a retreating

forehead, was slightly cocked towards his right shoulder, and his heavy-lidded black eyes set deep in cavernous sockets stared out fixed and vacant, like the eyes of a madman.

Lieutenant Filatov, the chief officer, a well-nourished dapper man in a summer uniform of white drill and shining black boots, came up.

"Who's this, scarecrow?"

The sailor shifted his feet, raised his right hand to his cap, and stared at the chief officer in silence. The latter referred to the paper he was holding and began questioning him.

"Name?"

"Matvei Zudin," the sailor drawled.

"Been in prison?"

"Yessir."

"What for?"

"Don't know, sir."

"H'm, a bad egg, I see."

"No sir, I'm seaman Zudin."

"Shut up!"

Filatov took a closer look at the sailor's face and fell back a step.

"You've been in prison for insolent behaviour towards your superior officer?"

"No, sir."

"You're a liar."

Zudin's high cheek-bones began to twitch.

"I never tell lies...."

"That's not the way to answer! I'll haze you! Clear out!"

Without looking at anyone Zudin picked up his kit-bag and shambled forward, dragging his huge rust-coloured boots over the deck.

The chief officer came down from the upper deck, shouting:

"Messenger, call the bos'un!"

Back in the wardroom, sitting at the table, he complained to the officers:

"It's a disgrace! They send all kinds of trash to this ship. A sailor has just come on board. I find he's been in prison—a great hulking lout with the eyes of an imbecile. What am I going to do with him?"

"I think it's time they stopped dumping on the navy all the rotten seamen they have ashore," put in the chief storekeeper with a look round the table.

The other officers agreed with him.

And when boatswain Zadvizhkin, a short hatchet-faced man with wicked yellow eyes and a small fair beard, came into the wardroom holding his cap in his left hand, the chief officer, almost without shifting his position, said:

"Look here, bos'un, they've sent us a travesty of a sailor—but that's Greek to you.... A crack-pot of a fellow has blown in—dirty as the devil, doesn't know how to speak to his superiors, no military bearing whatever, and what's more, he's a jail-bird. I want you to make a real sailor out of him. Get me?"

"Yes, sir!" the boatswain answered respectfully. "You needn't worry, sir. I'll have him walking the rope in three weeks like a real circus turn."

"For the time being put him on the lavatories. Dismissed."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Zadvizhkin answered, and turning on his heel, he went out with a light dancing step.

Zudin was sitting on the forecastle deck, engaged in the odd pursuit of emptying the contents of his kit-bag. The sailors crowded round him, but he went on with his business taking no notice of them and ignoring their questions.

"Ah, here we are, Mr. Scalawag," the boatswain said, coming up. The sailors respectfully made way for him.

At the sound of the authoritative voice, Zudin straightened up, and without looking at the boatswain, said:

"Why scalawag?"

"None of your lip! Follow me!"

The boatswain swiftly climbed the ladder with Zudin trailing reluctantly after him.

"Get a move on!" Zadvizhkin shouted irritably, glancing over his shoulder. "You walk like a cook-woman going to market...."

The lavatories were right aft.

"This is your country," the boatswain said, pointing to them. "The wash-stands and all the rest have to be kept clean and tidy."

"It's all the same to me," Zudin said indifferently, his shoulders drooping and feet planted wide apart.

"Stand properly, can't you, you damned jail-bird!" the boatswain shouted and, losing his temper, hit the man in the face.

Zudin jumped, as though he had been kicked awake. He drew himself up to his full height and, with fists clenched, fixed the boatswain with such a dreadful stare of his wild eyes that the man's blood ran cold. For several long seconds they stood facing each other, breathing hard. Zadvizhkin flinched, backed away, then turned irresolutely, ducking his head as though to dodge a blow, and scuttled off. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the sailor standing where he had left him, a huge ungainly figure, his lips drawn back in a savage grin, and his moustache twitching like beetle's whiskers, while the sailors standing around began to laugh at the boatswain's discomfiture.

II

A couple of weeks passed.

The gunboat *Zalyotnaya* was making hasty preparations for a long cruise. On sudden instructions from the naval authorities she was moving out to her new base in the port of Vladivostok. There was plenty of work to do.

The sailors, tanned brown by the sun, were kept busy for days on end, taking in coal, shells, machine oil, victuals and other stores. The officers, too, had their hands full, issuing orders and supervising the work of the crew. Boatswain Zadvizhkin dashed about the ship, shouting himself hoarse, making the air blue with his curses, and using his fists freely.

"Get a move on, doggone ye!" he wheezed, shaking his fists at the sailors. "Come on, wake up there!"

The sailors passed remarks about him as they worked.

"He wants to ship a killick, the damned barnacle. . . ."

"He's hand in glove with Beelzebub, they say."

Everyone got it from the boatswain except Zudin. The boatswain made as if he did not see him and took care to keep out of his way. Zudin, for his part, did his work carelessly, and the general stir and bustle aboard the ship seemed to pass him by. He sat most of the time in the forecastle, his head bent low, huge and unwieldy like a stone-age image. Once in a while he would come out to where the smoke-lamp was, roll himself a cigarette, and sit smoking in a brooding silence, staring past the men. When he did happen to look at one of the crew, his long heavy stare was so unnerving that the man would get up, saying: "Go to hell! Christ almighty, what peepers—they give you the creeps."

One dark night Zudin prowled about the dimly-lit mess deck for a long time, treading warily, ducking under the hanging hammocks and looking from side to side as if he were searching for someone.

"What are you mooning about here?" the sailors asked him.

He did not answer, and went on wandering about like a sleep-walker.

His odd behaviour, his sinister appearance, which filled men with a nameless fear, and the air of close secrecy surrounding his past intrigued the sailors and roused their

interest. Men discussed him, and made all kinds of guesses, but no one could probe the dark recesses of his soul.

On one point all were agreed.

"He would think nothing of murdering his own mother, let alone a stranger."

The authority of the surgeon's assistant, a spruce young man with ginger side whiskers, was called in.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but what do you make of Zudin?"

That young man, hand on hip and eyebrows raised, launched on a long account of mental cases, interlarding his speech with unintelligible medical terms and finally wound up, "To put it plainly, he's loony."

"That's about the size of it," the sailors agreed. "Why couldn't you say so right away, instead of beating about the bush."

"Isn't he dangerous?" the more timid inquired.

"No, not a bit."

From that day seaman Zudin was known as Loony.

The next Sunday, a fine bright day, when the listed group were preparing to take their spell ashore, Loony came into the chief officer's cabin, his body blocking the whole doorway.

"What are you doing here?" Filatov demanded.

"Let me go ashore," Loony muttered without looking up.

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because you're——"

The chief officer suddenly broke off, leapt from his chair and backed into a corner as if he had been pushed by an unseen force. A pair of dark sombre eyes, with black circles round them, stared at him out of deep sockets. It was his first glimpse of Loony's face, care-worn and stricken beyond his years, and with a deep tragic furrow across his

forehead. He experienced a feeling of terror mingled with pity for the unfortunate man, and said indulgently:

"Oh, all right, you may go ashore."

Loony stood there with a blank look upon his face.

"I said you may go. I'm giving you leave to go ashore!" Filatov raised his voice to a shout, as if he were speaking to a deaf man.

Loony turned without a word and slowly walked away.

"Damn it, I shouldn't have let him go," the chief officer muttered, angry with himself, as he watched the retreating figure.

That same day in town Loony met with the boatswain who, a bit tipsy, was walking quickly down the street towards the market-place, glancing from side to side every now and then so as not to miss saluting any passing officer. The two adversaries almost collided, and then stood hesitatingly for a minute.

"Well?" Zadvizhkin said shakily.

"Well what?" Loony said defiantly.

And again, as at his first meeting with the sailor, the boatswain quailed and cold terror crept into his heart. Turning, he quickly crossed to the other side, swearing horribly and glancing back over his shoulder as if he were afraid of being pursued.

The next day the chief officer sent for the boatswain.

"Well, how's that imbecile Zudin—is he making good?" he asked.

The boatswain was ashamed to confess his helplessness, and still more his cowardice—a thing entirely foreign to his forceful character. "Don't you worry, sir, we'd make a sailor out of a wild bull."

"And how does he perform his duties?"

"Splendidly, sir," the boatswain said, lying again in spite of himself.

Reassured by the boatswain's answers the chief officer dismissed the matter from his mind.

III

The *Zalyotnaya*, painted white and scrubbed clean, set out at last on her long cruise.

The days followed each other in monotonous procession, one exactly like another. The engines worked ceaselessly, propelling the ship onward to Vladivostok. It was fine sunny weather, marred occasionally by clouds and teasing flaws of wind, which ruffled the sea. The coast with its golden sands and town buildings, its green groves and luxuriant gardens had long since disappeared, and the sea spread ever more widely, delighting the eye, while the sun poured down its summer heat from the blue canopy of the sky. It was pleasant, amid this desolation, to meet some passing ship, to hail her, then continue each on her way, melting into the blue distance.

The crew had less work to do now, and most of the time they relaxed, gathering fresh strength and vigour. The men's faces grew fresher, laughter was heard more often, and in the evenings, after supper, rollicking songs sounded in the forecastle next to the ever-burning smoke-lamp. The boatswain, who had always bullied and terrorized the crew, grew milder as the ship got farther away from home waters. He even joked instead of cursing.

"Petrov!" he would suddenly hail one of the seamen in a tone of authority.

"Sir?" the man would answer promptly.

"Nothing. Just practising your name so's not to forget it."

The sailors would laugh.

They knew only too well why the boatswain was treating them better—he was afraid of Loony, who kept following him about with those terrible eyes—and they used this knowledge to frighten him still more.

"Ah, Trifon Stepanovich, you're in for it, I'm afraid . . ." one would say to him.

"What do you mean?" the boatswain would say, startled.

"Clear as daylight—Loony's out to get you. What does he care? He's just daft—you can't blame him."

In fact, whenever the boatswain was on the upper deck and happened to look into the lavatory under the topgallant forecastle, he was sure to come across Loony, who was watching him as a spider does a fly. Zadvizhkin, however, put on a bold front before the crew to hide his fear.

"What, me frightened of him! Why, I'll make a first-rate seaman out of that soger. He'll be spinning about the ship like a top by the time I've done with him. I've handled worse customers."

Working himself up, he would start to swear, and shout, and wave his arms about, but both voice and gesture had none of his old confidence.

"No, Trifon Stepanovich, you won't be able to do anything with him," the sailors would say. "He's strong as an ox, Loony is. The other day he lifted a whole coil of steel rope. Must have weighed about six hundredweights if it weighed an ounce. Went and picked it up just like that, for no earthly reason—just to show off his strength, I suppose."

The most horrific reports about Loony came from topman Petlin, a dull-witted fellow with goggle eyes, who had once been painfully humiliated by the boatswain. Petlin had spilt some soup on the deck, and the boatswain, in a fit of rage, had made him lick it up, lick the deck dry in front of the laughing crew. And now he was getting his own back on his tormentor.

"Well, Trifon Stepanovich, things look pretty black for you."

"What's the matter?" the boatswain would say, terrified.

"Loony's got a dagger. I've seen it with my own eyes. A whopper—as long as my arm, and sharp as a razor too,

all gleaming. He played about with it, then slipped it into the top of his boot."

"You don't say?" Zadvizhkin muttered.

"May I roast in hell if I'm telling a lie!"

"Couldn't you pinch the dagger?"

"Like fun! I'm not sick of life yet."

"I'll give you three rubles."

"I wouldn't do it for a hundred."

"I'll recommend you for promotion to petty officer."

"I wouldn't do it if you made me admiral."

The boatswain could not get a wink of sleep that night. He kept seeing Loony prowling about with the sharp gleaming dagger in his hand.

On another occasion the same topman went up to the boatswain in the morning while the upper deck was being washed, nudged him with his elbow, and, pointing forward, said:

"Just look at him."

Loony was standing under the topgallant forecastle with a crow-bar in his hand. Suddenly he began to swing it as if he were taking aim at somebody.

"He'll do for you ... if you don't look out."

The boatswain went pale, and felt as if an ice-cold hand had gone down his back. He hurried below and locked himself up in his cabin, pleading illness. Petlin went up to Loony and started putting ideas into his head.

"The bos'un's dead scared of you ... expecting you to do him in any day now."

Loony looked up and stared at him in silence.

"Why are you staring at me with those peepers? I'm telling you—the bos'un's got the jim-jams. Why don't you put him out of his misery?"

"All right," Loony said apathetically, and turned away.

He slept on the mess deck, and was often to be seen there, lying on his back in his clothes and boots, staring

with wide-open eyes at the ceiling, and one could never tell whether he was asleep or awake. Sometimes he would moan heavily in his sleep, frightening his shipmates. Awakened one night by a squall he suddenly began to fuss about, and asked a sailor who had just been relieved of the watch, "D'you hear?"

"What?" the man asked.

"Children screaming, a woman crying. . . ."

"It's the wind howling in the ventilators."

"It isn't!"

Loony jumped up and ran out on deck in his underwear.

The sailor shook his head as he turned in. "Things look bad," he said to himself. "Cracked up altogether. And a head without a brain is like a lighthouse without a light. . . ."

During the day Loony still kept to the forecastle, speaking to no one, living in a lonely world of his own, a desolate world of darkness and obscurity. He took no interest in the life around him. It seemed as if a single heavy thought, like a leaden cloud, had driven all other thoughts from his mind, filling it with the blackness of despair. His terrible eyes, unfathomable as a moonless autumn night, sank deeper into their sockets, the blue circles round them grew wider, and his ashen face was more and more often contorted by a tragic grimace.

IV

The *Zalyotnaya* had called at two foreign ports, where she had renewed her supplies of coal and stores, and continued on her way, leaving a frothy wake astern. Now she was running due south, as though eager to reach the tropical sun as quickly as she could. The shimmering air was incandescent under the blazing sky, and the blue sea threw back its dazzling reflection.

Discipline on board the ship became lax.

The boatswain lived in terror of Loony, who seemed to haunt him. Death always seemed to lurk under the topgallant forecastle in the person of that ghastly-looking seaman. Dread took possession of the boatswain's soul, and his courage deserted him. He tried to ingratiate himself with the crew, to make friends among them.

"We'll have the time of our lives soon, boys. Wait till we get to Africa. The women there are hot stuff, let me tell you. They go crazy over sailors. And are they fond of kissing! You've never seen girls so cuddlesome in all your life! It's the sun that does it—fires their blood, you know. Christ, you'd give your life for a woman like that. We'll take their temperature, boys, eh?"

Zadvizhkin cocked his head knowingly and narrowed his cunning eyes.

The sailors laughed excitedly.

"I'll go down town with you myself and show you all the wonders of Africa. Treat you to absinth. That's a kind of liquor, a regular corpse-reviver, stronger than our vodka. We'll have a go at hashish, too. If you smoke enough of it your soul goes on a flying visit to paradise. Afterwards I'll take you to the native theatre. You'll see the belly dance there. It's a sight, I tell you. Imagine a girl just wearing a smile, a peach of a girl, standing on one spot and just dancing with her belly. Gets a fellow all sizzling. Enough to drive you crazy. When I get home I'll teach my wife to do it...."

Warming to his subject, the boatswain would yarn about India, Japan and other countries he had been to, holding forth until some sailor, with ill-suppressed malicious glee, would interrupt him.

"That's all very well, but I'm afraid you won't be seeing any more of it, Trifon Stepanovich."

"Why not?" Zadvizhkin would ask, instantly alert.

"You know as well as I do—that fellow Loony is bound to get you any day now...."

"You fool!" the boatswain woud shout, running away.

"Same to you and many of 'em," the man would shout after him.

The boatswain lost all control over the men, and ship duties were carried out in a slipshod fashion. Noticing that discipline was becoming lax, the chief officer one day took the boatswain severely to task.

"Where are you hiding all the time? Why don't I see you on the upper deck?"

"I'm keeping an eye on the crew, sir..." the boatswain began, but the chief officer jumped down his throat.

"Nonsense! You boasted you'd make an acrobat out of Zudin, but you're scared of him. Aren't you?"

"You see how it is, sir—if he didn't have a tile loose, I'd work his old iron up properly," the boatswain said at last confessing his helplessness.

"You're no damned good, that's what it is! I'll demote you! Get out, you blockhead!"

The boatswain left the cabin red and flustered.

"Had a steam bath, bos'un?" the sailors asked him, laughing.

Only yesterday they had been slaves; he had spat in their faces, bullied and insulted them with malevolent ingenuity. But now they grew bolder and more insolent every day, annoying him on every possible occasion. It was strange to see the boatswain, once a cruel driver at whose glance the whole crew had quailed, now transformed into a helpless wretch who clutched his head in utter despair.

Fear of the mysterious Zudin, as of some monster who haunted the forecastle with dark and evil intentions, spread to all the quartermasters and boatswain's mates, and even reached the wardroom. All the officers including Filatov, the chief officer, were afraid of Loony, and tried

to keep out of his way, but no one would admit it. There was a feeling of disaster in the air, a haunting certainty that something dreadful was going to happen.

Filatov finally lost his patience and asked the ship's commander for permission to draft Loony ashore at the next port on the grounds that he was a madman.

"Why, is he violent?" The commander, who suffered from ill health, stroked his bald head.

"Not exactly, but he's a dangerous man to have on board a ship."

"Well then, we'll keep him on board until we get to Vladivostok."

"In that case, as there is no other suitable accommodation, let me keep him in the lock-up or tie him up."

"Goodness, no! That would be quite unlawful. He isn't a criminal, after all."

Filatov did not press the point, and returned to the wardroom angry and worried.

"He's so damned pedantic!" he complained to the officers. "That bald head of his is stuffed with circulars and instructions like a sausage with meat. What does he care for the demands of life!"

"What's the matter?" asked one of the officers.

"Oh, the commander—he's the blessed limit! He won't have anything done about seaman Zudin. The man's obviously crack-brained. God knows what mischief he'll be up to."

"Yes, life aboard has become hell," the other officers admitted. "It's like some ghastly horror that has taken human form. Why should we keep him aboard?" The officers sat for a long time discussing Loony and suggesting various ways of getting rid of him, but they came to no definite conclusion.

V

The *Zalyotnaya* had no sooner passed The Straits and entered the Mediterranean than the weather broke. Heavy wracks of cloud scuttled across the sky, a swirling wind sprang up, and the whole watery plain grew ruffled and sullen. Everything had turned a leaden colour. A storm was brewing.

That was in the morning. Towards the evening the waves were dancing wildly, tossing the ship about, and the wind was howling in different keys.

All this seemed to make Loony restless. He came out more often from under the topgallant forecastle, as if in the grip of some disturbing emotions. Standing on the upper deck with his hands on the bulwark, he peered into the foaming tumult of the greyish gloom and shouted, tossing his head:

"Aha, fine! It's starting...."

Balancing himself, he crossed the deck.

He ran into topman Petlin, and seemed to be glad to meet him. He broke his habitual silence, his eyes glittering feverishly.

"They said only cinders remained of 'em.... It's a lie! They're alive, alive...."

"Who are?" said Petlin, blinking his goggle eyes.

"My kiddies and my wife. They're calling me, every night they call me. It'll soon be over...."

The topman was puzzled.

"What will?"

"The watch."

"What watch?"

"My watch."

"What about the bos'un?"

"Ah yes, the bos'un, the bos'un..." he muttered, turning away, as if trying to recollect something.

The next day the gale freshened. The reeking clouds, dark as straw smoke, sank lower in a tumbled mass, pressing heavily upon the sea and narrowing the horizon; tumultuous seas rolled across the roaring waste, and blustering winds raced past with a howl and scream, raising cascades of pearly spray. Thunder crashed ceaselessly in the semi-gloom, which was stabbed by dazzling zigzags of lightning; the din and uproar were terrific. The sea boiled and spluttered as if it had hell's fire under it.

The *Zalyotnaya* barely managed to hold her own against the infuriated elements. Her ventilators roaring, she was tossed about in the raging sea like a nutshell, now plunging into the watery chasms, now rising again on the crest. Sometimes a madly racing wall of water would crash upon the upper deck, sending a shower of spray over the bridges, but the gunboat, shuddering throughout her frame and dropping heavily into every sea that struck her, stormed along on her set course.

The commander was in the navigating house all the time, pale and haggard, gazing at the horizon with anxious bloodshot eyes. He left the conning of the ship entirely to the navigating officer, a self-reliant elderly man who knew all the whims of the sea.

Many of the men were suffering from seasickness, and lay sprawling in the crew's quarters or lurched about the decks with green faces and glassy eyes, as if they were poisoned.

Bare-headed and drenched with spray, the pupils of his wandering eyes unnaturally dilated, Loony staggered about the upper deck like a drunken man. He cupped his hand over his eyes and peered into the murky distance, as though admiring the angry, heaving sea. His usual sullenness had given place to elation.

"Now that's a gale!" he muttered to a sailor, gripping the man's arms.

"Let me go, you crazy chump!" the terrified sailor cried, struggling to free himself.

"Go to hell!" Loony shouted, flinging the sailor from him and running to the bowsprit.

Coming out on the upper deck after dinner the chief officer noticed that one of the boats was insecurely lashed down. He ordered the watch to call the boatswain.

"What is this?" Filatov shouted, jabbing a finger up at the boat. "One end's lashed higher than the other! And d'you call these knots? It's a disgrace to the ship."

"Sorry, sir," the boatswain mumbled, saluting.

"You don't earn your salt, confound it!"

Neither of them noticed that Loony, wild-eyed, dishevelled, his face hideously contorted, was creeping up to them, crouching for a spring.

Lightning ripped the sky, followed by a deafening clap of thunder.

A sea broke upon the deck, drenching the boatswain and the chief officer from head to foot.

This made Filatov still more angry. Coughing, with the taste of sea-water bitter in his mouth, he snarled at the boatswain as if it were his fault:

"I'll rot you in the lock-up, you scoundrel!"

"It's all the sailors' doing. . . ."

"Shut up!"

With a scream Loony flung himself upon the boatswain with the ferocity of a wild beast, seized him round the middle, lifted him bodily off the deck as if he were a child, and rushed off with him to the ship's side. A fierce struggle ensued. One, with the horror of death upon him, kicked and fought like a maniac, using his teeth, legs and arms; the other, his teeth bared, held him in an iron grip, drowning his agonized screams in blood-curdling malicious laughter.

It lasted only a few seconds. The sailors, who happened to come out on the upper deck, and the chief officer

stood watching the scene in frozen wide-eyed horror. None of them stirred a foot to rescue the boatswain. And only when the two grappling bodies dropped overboard did Filatov raise his hand and cry in a voice that sounded hardly human:

"Man overboard! Throw a lifebelt! Stop the engines!"

There was another flash of lightning, a still louder crash of thunder, which mingled with the uproar of the storm in an awesome chord.

There was a great stir and bustle upon the deck, while there, in the raging sea, swiftly dropping astern, the two men continued their struggle for a while, now disappearing, now coming to the surface again, until the dark waters closed above their heads for ever.

1917

THE STOWAWAY

I

IT was a squalid little eating-house, one of those places only to be found in the poor quarter. A smoky ceiling. Wallpaper hanging down in strips. Here and there on the wall cheap prints. In one corner an old clock with broken hands, ticking drearily. Cabbies, petty tradesmen and workmen sat at the tables, noisily sipping hot tea out of saucers, drinking vodka and devouring cheap snacks. The fat bald-headed barman in a striped cotton shirt and greasy jacket sat dozing behind the bar with his arms on the counter.

The place was stuffy, and reeked of fried onions, tainted food and vodka. Wreaths of tobacco smoke hung in the air. The talk was jaded, desultory and trite. Occasionally someone would utter a coarse meaningless oath just by force of habit. Men's minds were empty of thoughts or desires, as if everything had been thought over long ago, told and retold a thousand times. Life, too, seemed as meaningless as the working of that clock with the broken hands.

The air was thick with misery and boredom.

I sat at a corner table a little to one side. Before me stood a half-emptied beer bottle. I had been sitting like

that for close on two hours, with but a single thought in my mind—how to get away from this city.

I could not stay here any longer. My comrades had been arrested, and the police were looking for me everywhere. I had managed to elude them for the last few weeks by running about the town like a hunted animal. I dared not use my old passport and could not obtain a new one. I had no roof over my head, and knocked about between earth and sky. To be sure, I had some old acquaintances with whom I could have been safe for a time, but it was a risk none of them cared to take. Some would not even recognize me. And so I had to seek refuge for the night in some half-built house or under a bridge; sometimes I spent the night walking the streets. I was tired out. And I saw a spy almost in every person I met.

I had to get away somewhere, have a good rest and take my bearings anew.

The trouble was I had only six rubles in my pocket. The thought of having to wander about the streets again that night, shivering with cold, afraid of my own shadow, was unbearable. Besides, my money would not last much longer.

What would I do then?

A sense of depression and futility assailed me. I could not go on like this; it was like swinging over a precipice on a rotten rope that might break at any moment and send you hurtling to your death.

My dismal thoughts were distracted by two men, who had just come in. They sat down at a table next to mine and ordered two vodkas and fried eggs with sausage.

I watched them with idle interest.

One was a muscular sturdily built man of about twenty-eight, over medium height. He had a large round head, set firmly upon a short neck. His fair stiff hair was dishevelled. His broad, typically Russian face, with a straggling moustache, bore the stamp of heavy toil. His

grey, eyes, however, looked cheerful and steady. He had a deep strong voice, which seemed to have the moist tang of the sea in it.

His companion, on the contrary, was a puny little fellow, whose every movement betrayed a habit of helpless docility.

The first man filled the glasses with vodka and, smiling good-naturedly, slapped his mate on the back.

"Well, old chap, here goes! This is our last swig of Russian stuff. In a week from now, Grisha, we'll be sampling English whisky."

"Cheerio! Happy sailing!" said Grisha.

I gathered from their further conversation that they were seamen, working as stokers on a merchantman. I listened further.

Good heavens, they were sailing for London the next day!

What about asking them to take me to England?

I turned away for a moment, fearing that my face would betray my excitement.

Hunted and broken down as I was, there was nothing more for me to do in Russia. If only those men would help me, I would leave the country. I'd go abroad, see how other people were living in the world.

My vision had leapt the wide seas, conjuring up a picture which, though strange and hazy, was none the less alluring and full of interest.

How was I to accost them? How was I to open the conversation?

"Be careful, it's as much as your life is worth!"—the warning thought flashed across my mind.

"Oh, no!"—came second thoughts. "I'm a seaman myself and I know how to talk to my kind. Die game—that's the thing."

"Off some ship, mates?" I asked.

"Yes," the bigger of the two answered. His name, as I learned afterwards, was Trofimov.

"Black gang, I suppose, acting the ghosts in hell?"

"You're right. And who may you be?"

"I'm adrift, without rudder or compass. A derelict knocking about the sea of life at the mercy of the winds. Just dropped in here by chance. I'll take it easy for a bit, then start tacking again among the reefs till I touch bottom."

"So you're a seaman too?" Grisha said, interrupting me.

"You bet! Served in the navy for seven blessed years. Pickled in brine right down to the bone. I could lie in the ground a hundred years without rotting."

Trofimov regarded me closely. Then, like a cross-examiner, he started to question me where I had sailed and in what capacity I had served. I answered his questions with a liberal sprinkling of nautical terms.

"Now I see you're one of us old salts all right," he said at length with a broad grin. "In that case, come over to our table and have one with us."

We each tossed off a glass of vodka.

I could see that the boys had taken a liking to me. I went straight to the point and asked whether they could take any passengers.

Trofimov guessed at once what I was driving at.

"Look here, mate—what's your name by the way?" he said lowering his voice and eyeing me narrowly.

"They used to call me Dmitry."

"Well, look here, Dmitry—is that true about your being on the rocks?"

"Of course it is!"

He looked round cautiously, and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Is it political, something serious?"

"Yes, I'm likely to swing for it," I said curtly.

Trofimov's face betrayed his agitation. His hands moved restlessly over the table. He was now looking at me with sympathy. Grisha had turned pale.

"Would you go as blind baggage?" Trofimov said.

I did not understand him.

"As a stowaway, I mean. Stuck away in some hiding place. Get me?"

"Yes."

"All right."

I felt as if a bright beam of hope had burst upon my soul through the dark cloud of despair and sent my spirits soaring. It was all I could do to keep from throwing myself on his neck.

"What will it cost?"

"Oh, we shan't take any money from you. Just buy the boys a bottle of blue ruin and half a dozen salted herrings to go with it, and give them three rubles, if you've got it, and the thing's as good as done. Be on the ship round about eight."

I agreed with alacrity.

"I hope Yershov doesn't get wind of it," Grisha said.

What was that? Was someone going to upset our plans? But the other said:

"Oh, never mind him, pal. We'll do that donkey in as easy as anything. He's on shore leave today and won't be getting back to the ship before eleven."

I asked who Yershov was.

"He's our coal trimmer," Trofimov explained. "A natural-born sneak. The captain's third ear. And the captain's a nasty piece of work, too! Regular shark. If he takes a dislike to you, you're done for. He'll eat you up, the blighter. He thinks nothing of driving a man to his grave—gets a kick out of it, if anything. I've known him do it. But you needn't worry. We'll hide you."

We talked of one thing and another for a while, and then, after telling me how to get to the steamer, the stokers left the place.

Half an hour later I followed in their steps.

II

Although it was April, the weather was piercing cold. A stiff wind was blowing. The telegraph-wires hummed drearily. The sky became overcast; bleak and heavy, it hung low over the earth. Cloud-racks scudded past, bound for God knows where.

The gathering gloom of night cloaked the city in a grey pall. The stone buildings seemed to cower and huddle closer together. Everything was bleak and desolate, not a living soul was to be seen, save the lonely policemen, who stood at their posts with hunched-up shoulders, sleepy and motionless.

But I was in high feather.

I had bought a bottle of vodka and some herrings for the stokers and was hurrying along, walking on air. I chose the narrowest and loneliest streets, holding the bottle for all to see, and secretly laughing at my pursuers. Catch me if you can!

I passed a large square.

Scenes of the recent past rushed back upon my memory. Three years ago I had stood on this very spot. Thousands of people were gathered here. Banners fluttered proudly. And out there, in the middle of the square, speakers standing on an overturned barrel that served as a platform uttered impassioned speeches. The crowd was afire. A song rang out, sweeping and powerful. It burst from toil-worn chests, from the depths of anguished and broken hearts, flooding the square like a released torrent that had been pent up for ages.

And now?... What had we to show for it? What was left of the past?

But away with these dismal thoughts! I walked on, inspired with fresh hopes.

At last I came to the harbour. Navigation had started only a fortnight before. Ice-floes still lingered here and

there. Steamers and barges lay moored in a row alongside the stone-faced quay. On some of them lanterns were burning brightly. Their masts threw long shadows upon the water. Work was going at full swing. Men ran backwards and forwards, bending under the weight of bales and crates. The air rang with the shouts of stevedores, the clatter of winches, the shrill whistle of steamers, the clang of iron and the thud of wood.

I quickly found the steamer I was looking for. Moored alongside the quay, she was belching smoke. She looked as if she had seen better days and weathered many a storm. I wondered how she still managed in a gale.

She was taking on cargo too.

A policeman! But he was looking down at the water where two lighter-men were having words over something or other.

I was already on deck. I went forward to the crew's quarters, and opened the door.

"Come in!" Trofimov greeted me. "No strangers here."

I set the refreshments and money out on the table and shook hands with the stokers. There were four of them, all decent-looking lads.

"To tell you the truth I was a little afraid you'd be pulled up on the way here," Trofimov laughed.

"Not likely! I steamed ahead at ten knots."

Presently we were all sitting at the large wooden table. The stokers were in high spirits. They drank themselves and treated me to drinks generously. For sheer joy I drank two glasses, and feeling hungry, demolished a whole herring with gusto. Everyone was chatting and joking.

Another stoker came in, a gloomy-faced, lanky beanpole of a man with bony shoulders and a sunken chest. He held a whispered conversation with Trofimov and the others.

"How much does he give?" one of the men asked.

"Eight jinglers."

After more whisperings Trofimov turned to the rest of the company for their advice.

"Look here, boys, there's another chap wants to go blind baggage. Made arrangements with Petrov. Young fellow. What about it?"

"Oh, well, might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb," someone said.

"That's what I was thinking. Let's take him. He'll be company for Dmitry too."

It was arranged that the new passenger was to come later, after I had been stowed away.

After we had finished the vodka and the snacks, the stokers went about their business, warning me to stay where I was until they came for me.

I did not have long to wait. Trofimov was back in a few minutes.

"Now's the time!"

He gave me a dirty stoker's suit to put on and rubbed my face with an old pair of sooty trousers. Then he handed me a chip of mirror.

"See how I've fixed you up—the spit and image of a stoker."

Indeed, my own mother would not have known me.

"Right about, quick march!" he commanded, laughing.

We came out on the upper deck. I took a last look round.

There was not a star in the sky. Nothing could be seen in the darkness but twinkling lights. The wind howled in the rigging, promising a gale. The choppy water in the land-locked harbour made fretful noises as though chaffing at its imprisonment, at the loss of its freedom and the wide spaces. Sleet pelted the deck and pricked one's face painfully. There were now fewer people on the quayside. Loading operations on some of the ships had ceased, but

men were still at work on our steamer, filling her tremendous maw with cargo of all sorts.

"Don't lag," Trofimov warned me.

We descended the ladder right down to the nether regions, and stopped for a moment in a narrow passage to see whether it was all clear in the stokehold. It was hot in there. Oil lamps glimmered, barely lighting up the dials of the water-gauges on the steam-boilers. Hammers, crowbars, drums and other accessories of the "black gang" were scattered about the place. Several men were keeping the watch. Among them was Grisha, who was feeding the furnace, bent up almost double. Another man was shovelling cinders into a heap.

We took several more paces and stopped between the boilers. Under us was the iron deck plating. Trofimov bent down and raised a trapdoor. Between the ship's bottom and the plating was a small compartment.

"Get in there," he said to me, pointing to the dark hole. "Afterwards, maybe, we'll shift you somewhere else."

As I was going down, the stokers laughed:

"Go on down to hell, you old sinner!"

"It isn't for long—forty times forty beggars are praying for me," I laughed back.

The trapdoor closed with a clang. It was pitch-dark. I was in a sort of hollow, with greasy bilge-water at the bottom of it. There was so little space overhead that I could barely sit up straight, and had to lie. I felt the walls. They were clammy to the touch. The place smelt of damp and rust. But I was not discouraged. The safer I felt, the keener grew my zest for life, and I was prepared to face whatever trials it had in store for me.

I lay thinking how often a man's fortune depended on mere chance. What would have happened to me if I had not gone into that eating-house, or sat down at that particular table? As it was, I was now well on my way to safety.

It was rather amusing to think of my present position.

"Ugh, you destroyer of old social orders and creator of the new life. So this is what you've come to..." I said to myself.

The plate above opened and someone crawled into the hole.

"Here's company for you, Dmitry," I heard Trofimov's voice. "Don't speak. They may hear you."

"All right," my fellow-traveller answered for me in a high-pitched youthful voice.

We were silent. We could not see each other.

Ten minutes later the plate was opened again. This time only a hand was thrust through the opening, holding some bundle. Again I heard Trofimov's voice.

"Here you are, Dmitry. It's some salt beef, bread, and a can of water for you and Vasya. So long! See you tomorrow. We'll shovel about three tons of coal over you—it'll be safer that way. Well, good luck!"

"Thanks, pal!" I managed to say before the plate slammed back.

I placed the bundle on one side, taking care not to spill the water.

I wanted to smoke—it would give me an opportunity, by the way, of taking a look at our dwelling and my fellow stowaway in the light—but as luck would have it, I had left my matches with the stokers. Vasya had no matches—he did not smoke. I cursed myself mentally for the oversight.

To while the time away I decided to take a nap. I turned over on my back with my hands under my head and my feet in the bilge-water. It was the only way I could dispose of my body.

Overhead boots clumped on the plating, and the voices of the stokers could be heard. My thoughts grew vague and confused, and I fell fast asleep.

III

I awoke in absolute darkness. There was a rumbling overhead, as of hard lumps of clay falling on the lid of a coffin. Forgetting for a moment where I was, I imagined myself in a grave, buried alive. A chill of terror ran through me.

I tried to jump up, but hit the plating with my head so violently that I almost lost consciousness. I flung myself aside, only to receive another blow and fall upon my companion.

"Dmitry! What's the matter?" he said in a startled voice.

Suddenly I realized where I was. That clatter overhead became clear to me too; it was the stokers shovelling coal over us.

I came to myself at last and gradually calmed down. Presently all grew quiet.

"What a fright you gave me," Vasya whispered. "They might have heard us."

"I'm sorry," I answered in the same low tone, and tried to make myself comfortable.

Something warm and sticky was trickling down the collar of my shirt. I felt my head. Blood was oozing from a cut, and there was a bump on my forehead too. I had not felt the pain of my bruises until then.

My clothes were wet. The water had risen noticeably.

Feeling thirsty, I groped for the can, but it was upset.

It could not be helped! There was nothing to do but wait.

"Where are you travelling to?" I heard Vasya's whisper.

"London. And you?"

"So am I."

After a while he put another question:

"Is it so serious that you have to run away so far?"

I did not answer. Suddenly it struck me that he might be a spy.

Meanwhile Vasya went on questioning me.

"Shut up!" I whispered angrily.

He fell silent.

I was uneasy. Why was he asking me such things when we had been told not to talk? I began to smell a rat. The more I thought about it the greater my suspicions grew. I no longer had any doubts that I was in the company of a treacherous spy.

"I'll strangle him!" I decided.

Judging by his voice he was none too strong. I could deal with him easily.

I shifted to a spot which I calculated to be under the trapdoor. My hands were trembling, and my fingers were clenched convulsively. Let him only try to get near the exit! I would seize him by the throat and choke the life out of him before he could squeak! And damn the consequences....

But he lay quite still, as if he were not there.

The faint sound of the ship's bell came from overhead.

I gathered from the seven strokes that it must be either three thirty or seven thirty in the morning.

Right over my head I heard voices:

"You were out rather late last night, Yershov. Where were you?"

"As if you don't know," the other answered readily in a snuffling voice. "Visiting the ladies, naturally. Drank *zapekanka*. Some peach, she was! A dark bit! Hot isn't the word for her!"

He gave a detailed account of his adventures, savouring each word.

Someone burst out laughing.

Trofimov, however, jumped down Yershov's throat.

"It's your conscience that's dark—black as a bunker, that's what!"

"What have I done, Pavel Artyomovich?" he said cringingly. "It isn't as if I'm doing harm to anyone. If I do have my bit of fun I pay for it out of my own pocket. So help me God, I——"

"I know you. Leave God out of it. You'd sell him for half a ruble any day."

The stokers went on talking, but my thoughts were running on my companion again. How did he know who I was? Had one of the stokers given me away? I could not make it out. I was choking with rage, and the blood rushed to my face. My heart pounded wildly. Every muscle was tensed. My mind was made up, and I was only waiting for a chance to fling myself upon my enemy.

"What if he is stronger than I?" the thought suddenly flashed across my mind. "I'm not what I used to be. Life has taken it out of me."

My confidence vanished, but the next moment I remembered that I had a large clasp-knife in my pocket. I took it out, opened it, and held it in my right hand. I did not experience the slightest fear, and gave no thought to the consequences. The only thought in my mind was to strike home.

"Come on, you dirty rat, I'm ready for you!" I said to myself with savage glee. "This knife will stop your little game for good. . . ."

Absolute silence.

The bells struck again, and a clear voice rang out:

"Knock off, boys! Breakfast!"

Obviously, it was eight in the morning. Soon we would be getting under way.

But what was my treacherous companion thinking? I bided my time.

Our ship was getting up steam. The boilers started hissing and panting. The steady throb of the engines could

be heard. The vessel quivered, rolled once or twice and got under way.

Thank God! Vasya was not a spy. Otherwise he would have shown his hand before this. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The next moment I shuddered. My God, what a crazy fool I was! Fancy getting myself worked up to such a state of suspicion. Why, I might have committed the most wanton crime. Vasya had only to make a single step or just stir a limb and it would have been all over with him. I broke out into a cold sweat. A pang of shame and remorse went through my heart. Damn it, I was positively crazy!

I flung the knife away from me in disgust.

The time passed imperceptibly until forenoon. But after that the hours of wearisome waiting dragged on endlessly. There were no signs of our being removed to another place.

The steamer began to roll. Obviously we were standing out to sea.

The water in our wretched den began to rise. It covered my feet and part of my back.

It was cold.

I was terribly thirsty. There was a bitter taste in my parched mouth. I cursed myself for having eaten the herring with such relish the other day.

Vasya was still silent.

I wanted to make amends to him, and several times attempted to speak, but my voice was drowned by the noise of the boilers. I crept closer, feeling for him in the dark, and lay down beside him. Our heads touched.

"Are you asleep, comrade?" I asked.

"No."

"How do you feel?"

"Bad. I'm simply freezing."

"So am I."

"Are they going to keep us here all the time?"

"They promised to move us."

I should have liked to continue the conversation, but I realized that it was none too safe. I asked one last question:

"Have you ever sailed in a ship?"

"Never."

We were silent again.

IV

It must have been evening already.

Our ship was pitching heavily. Outside the gale sang on a strenuous passionate note. The ventilators howled hideously. The surging sea pounded the iron hull in a raving fury, tossing our ship about like a nutshell. She climbed a wave one minute and plunged down the next, as if dropping into a chasm. Her timbers strained and cracked, as if the raging elements were bent on smashing her frame. Lumps of coal and other loose objects could be heard rolling about overhead.

Vasya and I sat side by side, miserable and dazed. There is nothing worse than living through a gale in a ship's bottom, and locked up at that. Aloft it is merely a grim experience, but below it is appalling even for a hardened seaman. Up there, in case of shipwreck, there is always a chance of saving oneself, but here one felt the breath of the yawning grave.

The water in our den kept rising steadily.

It was now up to our chests.

We were soaked in it like herrings in a barrel of brine. Our bodies seemed to have shrunk. Our teeth chattered from cold.

We could not lie on our backs because our heads would be in the water; to sit upright was impossible because of the plating. We had to sit doubled over, supporting the

body with one hand constantly resting on the ship's bottom. After a time this awkward position became unbearable.

Vasya was all in. I could feel his cold trembling hands on my neck. A low moan of anguish escaped him.

"I can't stand it.... I'm at the end of my strength.... I'll drop in a minute...."

I was afraid he really would drop, and held him up by the shoulders. They were as narrow as those of a boy of ten.

The thought as to where all this water came from was worrying me. I knew that when slag was slaked the water always flowed over the plating and trickled down into the hold together with the dirt. But it should not be as cold as this was. Moreover, in such cases the pumps were put to work. Something must be wrong. Either the ship had sprung a leak or something else had happened.

We lost all count of time. Probably several hours had passed, but to us it seemed an eternity.

Our alarm increased.

"What does it mean?" Vasya asked, pressing his mouth to my ear.

"I don't know...."

"Let's call out...."

"And what if Yershov hears us?"

"My God, we shall die here!"

Sheer terror sounded in Vasya's voice. He drew closer to me, and when the ship plunged with a crash into the trough of the sea he clung to me, quivering in every limb. Sometimes I could hear his teeth chattering unpleasantly close to my ear. He grew weaker and weaker and slumped heavily in my arms, which got so tired that I could hardly support him any longer.

Meanwhile the seas flung themselves upon our ship with unchecked overwhelming fury. She battled with

them, now dropping, now rising, darting this way and that like a wounded animal maddened with pain. As a seaman I could understand what was going on: those murderous onslaughts, the clash of that great iron hulk, quivering and groaning in the fierce grip of the elements. At one moment I heard the screech of rusty iron, as the straining ship bent. I could feel her straining on the crest of two ridges, a yawning chasm roaring beneath her. Decrepit ships with a heavy cargo are apt to collapse under their own weight and break in halves, shooting down into the dark seething abyss. But so far our ship was holding her own. All of a sudden I would hear a loud frantic drumming: rat-tat-tat.... It was the ship's stern lifting clear and her screws threshing the air, while the engines, running idle, shrieked their helplessness. Sometimes the ship shuddered throughout her frame. It seemed as if, now completely at the mercy of the all-powerful gale, she were writhing in her death agony. At such moments the uproar, the hissing and the howling above our heads would gain in volume. Something thumped and banged and hopped about on the plating, as if a thousand devils had got together and were performing a mad dance.

Suddenly there came a thud quite near us. No doubt some heavy piece of cargo had broken loose. But to us it semed as if the ship were beginning to break up. We both started up.

Why didn't they move us? Were we to die in this dark hole?

We could not hear any voices. All was drowned in the savage uproar of the gale.

The water kept rising.

I felt as if I were sitting on ice. The cold penetrated to my very marrow. My limbs grew numb, and the blood almost froze in my veins. We were gasping for air. When-

ever the vessel listed, or a sea struck her side, the dirty bilge-water splashed over our faces. There was an oily, bitter, nauseating taste in my mouth.

Vasya was sobbing. Poor devil! What agonies he must have been suffering, if I, a seaman wise in the boisterous ways of the sea, was quaking with terror.

I could not stand it any longer. Every minute was sheer torture.

If I called out it would be my ruin. What's more, it would get the stokers into trouble. They must have had good reasons for keeping us here. Perhaps someone was in the way. I had to choose between dying at the hands of the executioner or suffocating in this hole.

I hammered at the plating with my fists. No use. One would have had to employ a sledge-hammer to be heard. There was a last hope, however: I could try to raise the plate. I jumped at the idea. I let Vasya go. I could hear him floundering in the water, but I was past caring. I set my back under the plating. My chest felt like bursting from the strain, and my eyes fairly popped out of their sockets. But the plate refused to yield. I had forgotten that coal was heaped on it. What was to have been our deliverance became our undoing. There wasn't much of it, perhaps, but enough to keep us buried here.

It was the end . . . we were trapped, buried alive. Fate had pronounced her verdict of death upon us both. In a few minutes the sentence would be executed: instead of the scaffold, this accursed hole; instead of a guard, this iron cage; instead of the hangman, this bilge-water.

A chill ran through my body.

I took a grip on myself. I must try again to raise the plate. If I failed I would cry out. The thing was to find some other plating with perhaps less coal heaped on it.

I made a movement and collided with Vasya. He gave a ghastly scream and clasped me wildly round the neck as if he would choke me. I flung him off. Either I'd break

under the strain, or we'd be saved. In a frenzy of despair I exerted all my strength....

And there, outside our tomb, the million-mouthed gale was roaring and snarling, as if mocking at my impotence....

Suddenly a new and horrible thought struck me.

My God, they must have heard that scream of Vasya's and yet they had not let us out! Was I mistaken in taking those stokers for comrades? Were we the victims of a brutal outrage? In another few minutes we would be corpses....

All this flashed through my mind like a black squall, leaving me dazed and paralyzed.

Just then something heavy crashed upon the ship. It sounded as if a huge rock had tumbled down upon her. There was a rending, splintering noise. The ship listed sharply, dangerously. I fell, and went rolling away, half-drowned in the water.

The full horror of the situation leapt to my mind, vivid and clear. A throb of violent pain shot through my whole body, as if I were being flayed alive. A cry of despair burst from my breast. It was one of those moments when a man's hair suddenly turns white....

I sprang up with a tremendous effort, but struck my head against the plating and dropped back limp. Stunned and dizzy, I floundered about in the water. But that lasted only a moment. I was up again, in a fit of frenzy, waving my arms about. Blood-red fiery circles flashed before my eyes. It seemed to me as if I were no longer in the ship's hold, but swallowed up in a black bottomless abyss. Perhaps the ship was already sinking. Whenever I opened my mouth to shout some thick mass rushed into it, tearing at my throat. I was suffocating....

V

I was dimly aware of two men gripping me under the arms and hoisting me out. I could not stir a limb. An endless variety of coloured circles swam before my eyes.

"This one's alive," someone shouted, bending close over me. "His eyes are open.... Mouth gaping...."

"You don't say?"

"Look."

Then I heard a familiar deep-chested voice.

"And where's the other one? Drag him out."

I was turned over, and hands began to knead my back.

I felt a spasmodic movement within me, like a violent fit of the hiccups; my jaws unclenched; my whole body tensed, and I started to vomit. My stomach seemed to be turning inside out. Presently I began to feel better. I breathed more freely.

I heard exclamations of joy and opened my eyes. Several men were speaking to me at once. They fussed around me, whispering to each other and glancing around uneasily.

Gradually I became conscious of what was happening around me. The fussy solicitude of the men calmed my fears. Exhausted, I closed my eyes sleepily. I felt myself being lifted up. Several men called out hastily:

"Hold him!"

"Right-o!"

"Here goes!"

My body slid along a hot wall. The men laid me down on the iron plating and disappeared. I was in a new place.

I looked round. A small lamp fastened to the wall burned dimly. I was in a sort of square compartment enclosed within iron bulkheads. Something round and hot to the touch rose from the centre, filling up most of the space. It was the funnel. Above it was a maze of steam pipes,

for all the world like huge snakes, wriggling away through the iron bulkheads. Still higher was the deck. Everything was covered with a thick layer of coal-dust. It was warm. I gathered from what I saw that I was in the boiler casing. Consequently, under me must be the boiler-room, and below that the furnaces.

The salt-water sediment was eating into the wounds in my head, causing me great pain.

It reminded me of the horrible experience we had had below....

But where was Vasya? What had happened to him? Was he alive? Just then Trofimov, Petrov and another stoker carried him in and laid him down beside me. He was unconscious. The swollen throbbing veins on his neck were the only signs of life.

Breathing hard, the stokers stood staring at him, with perspiring, troubled faces.

I got up on my elbow.

"Dmitry has come round!" Trofimov cried. "Thank God! Whew, what a fright you gave us! Forgive me, old chap, but it wasn't our fault. I'll tell you about it later on."

Turning to his mates he said, "Come on, boys, let's try artificial respiration on Vasya."

"There's no room in here," Petrov said. "Besides, it's a long job. If you ask me we'd better hold him head downwards. They say it's the best thing to do in such cases. The water will pour out in no time."

"What about pressing a knee to his stomach?" suggested a third.

"Are you crazy?" Trofimov cried. "You'll bust his bladder in a jiffy."

"Nonsense! A man's bladder is lower down. I meant pressing a bit higher up. I remember at our village—"

"At your village the cows graze on the roofs, you sap!" Trofimov shouted at him. "Shut up, for God's sake! Don't make out you're a bigger fool than God made you."

In the end Petrov's advice was taken. One of the stokers kept a look-out, while the other two gripped Vasya by the feet, turned him head downwards, and started to shake him. His head waggled. Although he was not heavy, the stokers were hard put to it to keep their balance and their grip on him, with the ship rolling and pitching as it was. It seemed as if they all would fall on top of him at any moment and crush the last breath of life out of him.

Vasya started to twitch, and at last water began to ooze from his mouth.

"That'll do, otherwise we'll spoil all his innards," said Trofimov.

They laid Vasya down on the plating. He began to relieve himself of the water he had swallowed. He tossed about, moaning, his face distorted. When he stopped vomiting Trofimov would thrust a finger down his mouth, and make him go on. Vasya's body would then writhe in violent throes, like a worm that had been trodden on.

The stokers went away at last, expressing their confidence that all would be well now.

Gradually I came to myself. So did Vasya. Cold shivers still ran through our bodies although we were in such a warm place.

"Where am I?" Vasya said.

He sat up in surprise when I told him.

"My God! So that's what happened!"

We could hear the thunderous boom of the gale, but here it was not so terrifying as it had been in the hold.

The ship listed, turning Vasya upon his back. He lay like that for several minutes without stirring. The light of the lamp, falling straight on his face, gave me an opportunity of examining it properly.

Vasya ... yes, the diminutive fitted him well. He was quite a youth, apparently not more than seventeen. A slight slim figure. An attractive face with regular features and a high intelligent forehead, but worn-out and har-

assed-looking. Weariness was reflected in his large trustful eyes, which had yet a dreamy look in them, as though they saw blue alluring distances before them instead of the sooty iron bulkheads.

Looking at him I wondered where he had got the nerve to travel as a stowaway. And why? What would he, such a weak, delicate youth, do in a foreign land?

"Didn't you change your clothes?" I asked, noticing that he had on a good suit.

"They wanted me to, but I refused."

Petrov brought us a can of water and bread, with some stewed meat and potatoes in a crock. He did not stay, however.

"No time. It's the devil to pay down below—we're pumping the water from the holds. I'll drop in later on."

I offered my companion some food.

I ate heartily myself, but he only had a peck at the meat and potatoes and would have no more.

"I don't want anything," he said sadly. "I am feeling too ill."

Trofimov came in. He looked distressed and spoke apologetically. It was clear from what he said, however, that the stokers were not to blame. There had been an accident: one of the pipes running through the hold had blown a flange and sprung a bad leak; the pump valves, on the other hand, were choked and the pump had been running practically idle.

"We didn't know it, at that time," Trofimov went on to explain. "We couldn't take a look at you because Yershov had the watch. He was to go off in an hour. All of a sudden we heard a scream. We wondered what it could be. We grabbed our shovels and started shovelling the coal off the deck plating. And what should we see but water. That was when the steamer took a heavy list. We couldn't believe our eyes. We thought it was all up with you. Luckily Yershov happened to be in the coal-bunker

at the time, and didn't hear anything. Otherwise it would have been a bad look-out for you."

"You should have hidden us somewhere else, to begin with," I said reproachfully.

"But man alive—it was dangerous! They might have found you. As a matter of fact some chap came aboard just before we got under way. Very suspicious type. Hugger-muggering with Yershov all the time. I bet he was a spy."

I asked him how long we had been under the deck plating.

"It's past eight now. That means twice round the clock."

The steamer was still pitching and tossing.

Trofimov looked at Vasya, who was lying silent.

"How are you feeling, kid?"

"I feel sick."

"That's because you're not used to it."

A worried look came into the stoker's face.

"Where shall we put you, though? We had a suitable spot, but that's ruled out now. And I can't for the life of me think of anything else."

"Why can't we stay where we are?" I asked.

"Too hot. Must be round about fifty degrees, if not more. I don't think you'd stand it."

In fact, the heat was making itself felt. But after our chilly experience it seemed to us quite bearable. As far as I was concerned, our new place was paradise compared to the hold, and so I told Trofimov not to worry about us for the time being.

Vasya was agonizingly seasick. His body writhed and twisted. Several times he started to his knees, then fell back on the plating. To smother the unnatural sounds that burst from his throat he pressed his hands hard over his mouth. It seemed as if his guts were being torn out of him.

Seeing what torture Vasya was suffering, Trofimov brought him a lemon, and some tobacco for me. He stayed with us for a while until Vasya felt better, then blew out the lamp, told us to keep quiet, and went away.

Utterly worn out, we at last fell asleep.

VI

We had already been twenty-four hours in the boiler casing. Good as it had seemed to us at first, we now felt worse than ever. Our new den became a broiling hell. The darkness, the insufferable heat, and the burning hot iron had a deadly effect upon us, exhausting us both in body and soul.

At the sight of Vasya's sufferings, I began to feel seasick myself, old seaman though I was. My brain seemed to have gone soft from the heat.

The stokers brought us food, but we could not touch it. My throat was parched, and I suffered keenly from thirst. But the moment I drank some water, my stomach ejected it.

"How long have we been out?" Vasya asked bleakly.

"Two days."

"And how much longer have we to go?"

"Another five days."

"It will kill me.... Oh, my chest.... The pain..." Vasya cried in despair, and, throwing himself back, he began to toss about on the iron plating. I tried in vain to calm him. But he only groaned in reply.

The plating grew hotter, as if someone were purposely heating it. We spread out the tarpaulin the stokers had brought us. This somewhat eased our sufferings. The stokers often brought us cold water. We poured it over ourselves and felt a bit better. But a few minutes later it was worse than ever. Our wet clothes dried and stuck painfully to our bodies.

To divert my thoughts I tried to make conversation with Vasya.

"Have you anyone in London?"

"Yes, a good friend."

"Has he been there long?"

"He went out last autumn. Travelled the way we do. Only he had a better time.... He wrote——"

Vasya lapsed into silence, too weak to continue.

I, too, felt I could stand it no longer. My whole body seemed to be drained of strength. My brain was giving way.

Trofimov paid us several visits. He was obviously worried on our account, and took our sufferings greatly to heart. He tried in vain to think of a way out, and would go away swearing to himself. Finally he hit on an idea and announced it with an air of decision.

"We'll have to shift you to the coal-bunker. It's the only place I can think of. We have a reserve bunker with coal in it. Maybe Yershov won't stumble on you there. But if he does...."

He paused, and his jaws clenched hard with an ominous sound. When next he spoke his voice quivered with rage and expressed the determination of a man who would stop at nothing.

"Ugh, the bastard! We'll squash him like a fly! No, we'll burn him in the furnace and throw his ashes to the winds and seas. I'll do it myself! If it comes to anything I'll tell him that to his face. Don't worry, boys."

We raised no objections to the coal-bunker. We did not care where we went so long as we got out of this hell as quickly as possible.

But Trofimov had no sooner gone than another stoker came in and told us that something had gone wrong in boiler No. 4 and repairs were being made there in the presence of the engineer. To move us before he had gone was too risky.

"You just sit here quietly," the stoker told us and went away.

We had to stay in the casing for another five or six hours. Time seemed to have stopped. Our strength was ebbing fast. We could not stand and could not even sit. The air, which had been bad enough, got worse. Our breath came in quick gasps, and our mouths were open like those of fishes cast up on dry sand. There was no water. And we were suffering terribly from thirst. The scorching air seared our skins, got inside, and parched our lungs. It was all too obvious to us that we were suffocating.

Vasya's state was indescribable. He squirmed and tossed about on the plating like a live fish on a red-hot pan, now sobbing, now moaning with long-drawn rattling sounds in his throat. Once or twice I lit a match and tried to comfort him, then forgot about him entirely in my own distress.

There was a roaring noise in my ears. A weight pressed down on my heart. I felt very sleepy, but every five minutes I came out of a heavy doze, to turn the other side of my body over on the hot plating. The pain in my head was torture. It was splitting from the heat, and got worse and worse. I was losing my reason. Snatches of reminiscences rose before me, followed by ghastly visions, creatures of a sick imagination.

I was in some dark cramped hole. Above me was a mountain. What was I doing there? I don't know.... I tried to get out. Crawled on my belly. Farther and farther. I crawled a mile or more, until I was utterly exhausted, but still I saw no daylight. It was terribly hot and stuffy. I started back, but got stuck.... I couldn't move. I wanted to cry out, but my tongue wouldn't obey me. My voice went dead in this underground hole.... Was this the end then?

Suddenly I was jerked back into the world of realities,

but it was some time before I came to myself. My heart was throbbing wildly. Beads of sweat stood on my forehead.

Somebody was smacking my face, shouting:

"You beast! Go away! I'm not going to give you evidence!"

The voice was Vasya's.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"You beast!"

His head dropped on my knees. His body went limp and motionless.

I sat dumbfounded, trying to collect my wits.

The steamer was still pitching heavily amid a terrific din.

I dropped on my side, exhausted. In a minute or two a black impenetrable fog seemed to becloud my mind again. Once more nightmare visions haunted me. I was lying on a beach. Out of the turbid heaving sea, something long and hideous was wriggling towards me. It swelled into a shapeless mass. What could it be? Staring at me with gaping jaws was a sea monster! Good heavens, it was swallowing me! I was in its belly now. Surprisingly enough, its sides were as hot and hard as iron. I was choking....

VII

I came to myself in the coal-bunker.

Next to me stood a lantern, its flickering light barely struggling through the dirty glass. The place was in semi-darkness. Wavering shadows fluttered about. The ship was much steadier now. The engines throbbed rhythmically somewhere far, far away. My throat was painfully dry.

Trofimov was bending over me, pouring cold water on my head. It still ached terribly at the temples and was full of noises.

"Ah, Dmitry, Dmitry, the trouble we're having with you," Trofimov said earnestly, when he saw that I had opened my eyes.

I glanced at him questioningly.

"This is the second time it's happened to you," he went on. "We carried the two of you here in our arms. You were as good as dead, it's a fact. We've been working like mad this last hour, trying to bring you round."

He held a can of cold water to my lips. I drank thirstily without sitting up. The water refreshed me.

"How is Vasya?" I asked.

"He's bad, I'm afraid. There he is. He hasn't even stirred."

I sat up to have a look, but felt such a sharp pain in the whole of my left side that I dropped back again. A moan escaped me despite myself. What was it? My God! I had terrible burns on my side and on my face. One cheek was swollen.

Trofimov looked at me with sad, anxious eyes.

"What rotten luck," he muttered. "It never rains but it pours."

With a tremendous effort I pulled myself nearer to Vasya and peered into his face. Dirty and haggard, it looked lifeless. The eyes were shut tight, and beautiful white teeth gleamed through the parted lips. I felt his pulse. It was still beating, although very feebly.

"They'll bring some water in a minute," Trofimov said to me. "We'll give him a good douse. Maybe he'll come round."

Presently Petrov came in carrying a big iron bucket.

They poured cold water over Vasya's face and head, then shook him and turned him over from side to side, but nothing helped. Vasya lay prostrate, like a corpse.

The men worked at him for a long time bending over him every now and then with tired perspiring faces, listening for some sign of life.

"We ought to wet his chest," Petrov suggested.

No one answered him. He bent over Vasya, undid his tie, and unbuttened his waistcoat and shirt.

Suddenly Petrov recoiled as if he had been flung back by an invisible hand. He straightened up quickly and stared at us bewildered and startled, his big dirty hands spread wide.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"I . . . I don't know . . . My word! Well, of all the——"

And Petrov, with odd haste, straightened his greasy old jacket.

Trofimov picked up the lantern and played the light on Vasya.

We could hardly believe our eyes. The whole thing seemed more like dream than reality.

Before us, without a doubt, was a woman. In the dim light of the lantern we saw the bared breasts of a girl. We looked at each other in stunned silence.

"A woman!" Trofimov uttered in a voice that was like a sigh, and lowered the lantern onto the coal.

"Yes," Petrov echoed, as though freeing himself of some oppressive weight.

We collected our wits at last.

I advised buttoning her bosom up before she awoke. The stokers agreed with me.

Just as one of them was about to do it, she woke up. She stared about with a strange, wild look in her eyes. Apparently, she could not make out where she was.

The light shone dimly. The stokers stood silent and dumbstruck, their heads almost touching the upper deck. They looked weird in the semi-darkness. The whites of their eyes gleamed in their sooty faces, which merged with the dark. And there was I, crouching on my knees, with my hands resting on the coal, my face disfigured beyond recognition. She shrank and looked as if she were about to scream or plead mercy. There were a few moments of

oppressive silence. She came to herself. Lifting her head with a great effort, she noticed her bared bosom and fell back, breaking into a fit of hysterical weeping.

The stokers looked at me helplessly, not knowing what to do. At a sign from me they all slipped out of the coal-bunker.

It was dark again. The woman was still weeping. The sound was more than I could bear. I tried to calm her. But it was quite a time before she regained her composure.

"You wanted to dishonour me?" she said in a tone of despair.

"Nothing of the kind," I answered, and told her what had happened.

"Lord, how you frightened me!" she exclaimed, still sobbing.

I gave her some cold water to drink. Little by little she calmed down.

I asked how she felt. She complained that she was feeling bad. Had a high temperature. There were wheezy noises in her chest and she breathed with difficulty. What's more, her arm was badly burned.

The rolling had now ceased entirely. The steamer was running steadily, with only a slight quiver now and again. After a while we heard the clang of the anchor chain. Then all was quiet.

"I think we have stopped," my companion said.

Of that I was certain.

"Perhaps we have arrived in London already?"

"Quite possible," I said. I had no idea how long we had been in the casing.

The thought bucked us up tremendously.

My companion became almost light-hearted. Her voice grew stronger. She could speak now, although it cost her an effort. Apparently her strength was returning. The moderate temperature in our hiding-place no doubt had something to do with it.

I felt better, too, especially after I had eaten some of the bread the stokers had left us.

"What am I to call you now?" I said.

"Natasha," she answered readily.

I had scarcely mentioned my surprise at meeting her in such a place and in a man's disguise, when she volunteered the explanation herself.

"I have no doubt you are a comrade," she began in a friendly tone. "So I'll be frank with you and cut a long story short. It was like this: together with the others, I offered resistance. There was a fight. People were killed on both sides. I was arrested. For a long time I was kept in a solitary cell—right up to the trial. They threatened us with death.... It was a hard time, a terrible time. I worried myself sick. I even wanted to commit suicide. Then I planned to escape. I simulated madness. For a long time they didn't believe it; tested me out; kept me in a punishment cell. But I kept it up and had my own way. Sometimes I thought I really was out of my senses. At last they moved me to the hospital. My plan succeeded.... Wait a minute.... Oh, it's so hard for me to speak.... I have a terrible pain in my chest. I can hardly breathe...."

She rested, then went on.

"And so I was set free. But I didn't know what to do with myself. I had neither money nor reliable friends. I racked my brains until at last I found an acquaintance I could depend upon. She was a poor woman with children. She took me in. It was a very dangerous place —they might seize me again at any moment if they saw through my plans. I cut my hair, and put on a man's suit. I became a boy, and looked quite the part. A week later they managed to get me a passport. I spent three months with my acquaintance. During that time I got in touch with Yegor. He is living in London. Didn't I tell you about him?"

"Is that the friend you are going to?"

"Yes. He asked me to come to England, but he couldn't send me any money—he was starving himself. I decided to go there. A friend obtained a little money for me, but it wasn't enough to pay for my passage. So I decided to go as a stowaway, all the more that I was already wearing a man's suit. I've been through the mill. Life has treated me rather shabbily.... So a voyage like this didn't frighten me. I love risk and adventure. It's in my blood. Besides, I could never imagine it would be so terrible. Once I——I feel bad again, suffocating.... Once I——"

Natasha suddenly broke off. She coughed long and painfully. Then came gurgling choking sounds.

"Light the lamp," she said faintly.

I struck a match and was horrified to see blood gushing from her throat.

She shuddered and gasped for breath, then suddenly lost consciousness, and lay stretched out with scarcely a sign of life.

I sat next to her utterly at a loss. Exhausted myself, I presently dropped on the coal. A numbness seized me, and my mind went blank. Suddenly I leapt to my feet as if I had been stung. A rat had bitten my hand. The place was swarming with rats. All our food was gone. Attracted, apparently, by the smell of blood, they scrambled over us with nerve-racking squeaks. You only had to stop moving, it seemed, and those hungry rats would put you out of your misery at once.

VIII

Petrov, who brought us food, told us we had entered Kiel and after a three hours' stop had gone on farther.

Consequently, we had four more days to go before we reached London.

Our short-lived joy gave place to bleak disappointment.

The rolling motion of the ship told us that we were out in the open sea again. The gale strengthened. We could hear the booming of the sea.

It was dark. Fearing detection by the coal trimmer, I lit a match only on rare occasions.

During the stoppage I had managed to snatch a little sleep and now felt rested. But Natasha's condition was worse. She lay motionless on the hard coals and refused to eat.

"My chest is all on fire," she complained. "How it hurts!"

I laid her head on my knees.

"Ah, comrade, what a shame it is," she went on bitterly. "I am dying in this accursed hole. If I have to die, couldn't I do it usefully?"

"Cheer up," I said, trying to comfort her. "We'll be in London soon, and you'll be all right."

"Oh, if only that were true... I'd be the happiest woman. Yegor would be glad, too. But I won't last...."

"Have you parents living?"

"Yes, my father. Mother died when she heard her son had been shot. It killed her. Father went old in several months, a bent old man.... He's all alone now. And I can do nothing to help him."

She began to cry.

I stopped asking her questions and became lost in thought.

This heart-breaking despair was all too familiar to me.

The gale steadily strengthened until it reached its highest pitch of intensity. We could hear the mighty tumult through the iron plating. Thudding blows struck the ship's sides in regular and seemingly endless succession.

The careering ship shuddered under the smashing blows like a living creature. At moments she would check her mad career in a fit of abstraction, as it were, then suddenly plunge forward again.

At first I managed somehow to hold on, and tried to support Natasha, too. But the tossing and pitching was too much for us. Violent jolts knocked us down and sent us rolling from place to place, striking the bulkheads. The coal, as stokers say, was "on the loose." Big chunks of it trundled after us, jabbing their sharp edges into our bodies and raining coal-dust over us. We did not have a moment's peace. The pain was unendurable. Especially when I hit the coal with my burnt side.

Natasha was sinking fast. She became delirious and began to rave.

"Don't push me," she moaned. "It hurts. Yes.... That plan won't do.... We'll all be hunted down...."

Her lucid moments became rarer. At one such moment I asked her, "Feeling bad, Natasha?"

"I wish it were over, curse it! My God!"

Trofimov brought us his own mattress. I tried to lay the sick woman on it, but she immediately rolled off.

Another day and night passed. Perhaps more. The gale was still raging. The stokers said the seas were breaking upon the upper deck; one of the boats had been torn from its davits, and they feared more damage.

Coming to herself for a moment, Natasha cried with anguish, "I can't stand it. I'm frightened.... Carry me up on deck...."

"But the captain will see you there. He'll give you up."

She became delirious again.

We rolled down to the side, and lay there for a while. Suddenly she threw herself upon my chest. Her arms were round my neck. I could feel her hot panting breath.

"Yegor, darling..." she whispered, kissing my face.

The delirious caresses of this dying woman amid the sinister gloom of the coal-bunker and the ominous sounds of the howling elements made my heart sick with horror. I tried to disengage her arms, but she clung to me all the closer.

"Dearest!"

Here the gale came to my rescue. It hurled itself at the ship with such violence that I was instantly flung to the opposite side, and a sharp piece of coal pierced my burnt cheek.

Consciousness returned to Natasha for the last time. Her feeble voice came to me as through a dream.

"Comrade ... Dmitry...."

"Yes?" I answered quickly.

"I am dying," she said resignedly.

Hastily, with shaking hands, I lit a match and looked at her.

Her face, cut and bruised, and covered with coal-dust, was a pitiful sight. Tears stood in her eyes. She looked at me sadly, with utter hopelessness.

"You will find the address ... in my wallet.... Tell ... Yegor ... I ... I was coming.... Oh, I can't go on...."

She moaned, then, mustering her last ounce of strength, continued:

"Tell him ... all about it.... Let him——"

She broke off.

I bent over her quickly.

Too late! She was in her death agony. Death was coming into its own, imperious, implacable, and cruel. A deep sigh.... Another.... And all was over. I was holding in my arms a corpse.

I crawled away, and lay down on the coal, my face buried in my hands.

The rolling of the ship changed to a pitching motion. The wind had shifted round. It attacked the ship with such a frenzy that it seemed as if gigantic hands had seized her

masts and were shaking her in the air like a toy. I rolled about from side to side. My bruised body ached all over. No one came. I was growing weaker. I felt that the sands of my life were running out too.

What was that? Someone seemed to have thrown himself upon me.

I touched a body.... Natasha! But she was dead! Sheer terror gripped me, and, forgetting myself, I yelled, "Help! Help!"

Someone was shaking my shoulders, saying: "Come, come, Dmitry.... Stop yelling!"

I opened my eyes. Before me stood Trofimov with a lantern.

"What's the matter with you?"

"The dead woman's after me," I said, still quivering.

"D'you mean to say she's dead?"

He examined the body of Natasha.

"Poor thing!" he said in a saddened tone, sitting down next to the dead woman. "Her strength gave out. She was so young and weak...."

There were tears in his eyes. He sat brooding, his head bent.

"Well, we've made the mess, we'll have to clear it up," Trofimov said at length, getting up. His face had grown grave. "Yes, old chap," he added, looking at me as if I had something to say against it. "If that damned coal trimmer gets wind of this, there'll be the devil to pay, I tell you! A criminal case...."

Lifting the body, he carried it to the rear iron bulkhead where he hastily buried it in the coal.

All I remember after that was the stokers taking turns to sit by my side and hold my bruised body on the mattress so as not to let it start "on the loose" together with the coal.

IX

The gale dropped. The steamer forged ahead, rocking gently on the swell.

But now the rats went to work again. I could hear them squeaking and scuttling about in the darkness. Small and greedy, they went about their business, and from time to time attacked me. I was alone in the bunker. I lay on the mattress, ill and bruised, barely keeping them at bay. I dared not fall asleep for a moment. My brain refused to work. Time dragged on endlessly.

The news of Natasha's death came as a shock to the stokers. It weighed on their conscience, too. They could not help feeling that a young life had been cut off cruelly and senselessly. They blamed themselves for it to some extent, but what worried them still more was the thought of the consequences, of responsibility. The body had been lying in the bunker for two days, but the stokers had simply had no chance to get rid of it. They had intended burning it in the furnace, but no one had the nerve to tackle the job.

Trofimov was more concerned about my plight than anyone else. He came to see me whenever he had a chance.

"I hope to goodness this doesn't kill you too," he said anxiously.

"I'll be all right now," I said, but I was none too sure about it myself.

"Maybe you will. You've got a strong constitution, it seems. Still, after what's happened, I'm a bit scared."

Once he stayed very long with me, chatting, and telling me about his sea life. I felt much better in his company, although it cost me a great effort to hold up my end of the conversation.

"I suppose you have sailed in many ships?" I asked him.

"Plenty. Changed seven of them in my time."

"I daresay you've seen lots of stowaways too?"

"Well, yes. We have some in every ship. Sometimes they fix it up with the sailors, sometimes they hide on board without no one knowing. A fellow crawls into the hold or some other place and just sits there quiet. It's a good thing if he's laid up something to eat and drink. You can't very well go without food on a long voyage."

"Doesn't it always go off all right?"

"It does and it doesn't. Sometimes it's all right, and sometimes it's as bad as bad! Taking it all round, though, everyone of them had to rough it. Some even died. Once we came to a Russian port, started to unload, and found two dead bodies among the bales. You can never tell what they died from—maybe they didn't have anything to eat, maybe it was through seasickness."

Trofimov lighted a cigarette.

"I remember a case on a ship I'd been sailing in for four years. A regular police trap she was. We never came home without somebody being arrested—and always in the same place, mind you—the tiller room. It puzzled us for a long time, it did. But we got to the bottom of it at last. The helmsman turned out to be a regular informer! He'd smuggle people into Russia and give them up to the police. We caught him at it. He got what was coming to him all right. . . ."

"What did you do?"

"Sailors can do anything when they have a mind to. They're a tough plucky lot, you know. One night he came up on deck and stood by the side. It was blowing great guns. One of my mates, an engineman—strong as a bull, he was—went up to him quietly, grabbed him by the legs and pitched him over the side. Slick job it was. The fellow didn't have time to squeak. Ugh, he was a nasty piece of work, that helmsman. . . ."

Trofimov paused with a thoughtful air.

"These days people are mostly going abroad, you know," he said, as though debating with himself. "But it

used to be the other way round before—most people went to Russia. These are bad times, old chap. It's every man for himself, these days, and the devil take the hindmost. Folks have become so selfish. It's dog eat dog, whether you like it or not. Hell, what a life! It makes me sick. . . ."

Trofimov went on talking, but my head was so tired with the strain of listening, that I could barely follow his drift. All I heard were the measured, lulling tones of his voice, which, as far as I was concerned, were devoid of sense or meaning.

I fell asleep.

It was our last night. Tomorrow we would be in London. My voyage would be over. God, how I wished it was over quickly! They were taking coal from my bunker. I was in danger of being discovered.

After midnight three men came into the bunker—Trofimov, Petrov and Grisha. One of them was holding a rope, another a sheet of tarpaulin. They all looked gloomy and worried.

"We've come to take her away," Trofimov explained.

The stokers went over to the body.

Wishing to take a last look at her, I staggered after them like a drunken man.

Trofimov bent down and pulled the body out by the feet with a violent jerk.

Before us was a hideous face. . . . The flesh had been gnawed away by the rats and only blackened shreds hung on the bones. . . . Natasha had no ears, no nose, no lips. The teeth were bared in a horrible grin. The eyeballs alone were intact, their huge whites gleaming in the light of the lantern with a wicked leer, expressive of diabolic malignity. This could not be Natasha! It was like some evil spirit of the night.

"We must hurry up," Trofimov's masterful voice broke the oppressive silence. "There's no time to lose."

Grisha with a sudden cry of: "I can't, I can't!" tried to run away, stumbling and falling in his haste.

Trofimov seized him by the collar of his jacket. There was a scuffle, a smothered cry.... Grisha went down. One hand gripped his throat, the other struck blows at his head. He struggled fiercely, emitting strangled sounds.

"You swine! D'you want to get us all into trouble! I'll kill you!" Trofimov snarled in a kind of frenzy.

The leering eyes of the dead woman looked upon the ugly scene, and the disfigured grinning face seemed to twist into a grimace of fiendish glee.

At this point, however, Petrov interfered.

"Stop it, man!" he shouted, seizing Trofimov's arm. "What the devil are you doing?"

Trofimov let the man go.

Grisha crawled about over the coal, muttering dazedly:

"All right.... I'm staying.... I'm not saying anything!"

All three busied themselves with the dead body, trying not to look at its face. They jostled each other, and got in each other's way. In their haste they did everything wrong. At last they got the body rolled up in the tarpaulin and tied the rope round it.

They carried the corpse out of the bunker.

After a while Trofimov came back reporting, "Thank God, we've buried her."

"How?"

"Don't you know what a sea burial is? We tied an iron weight to the body, made the sign of the cross over it, and dropped it overboard. We hauled the body up on deck in the slag barrel through the winch tube."

He wiped the sweat off his face with his sleeve. He was breathing hard. His nerves were still keyed up, and he looked about him uneasily.

"A hell of a mess, old chap!" he said, shaking his head. "It's a downright shame."

After a short rest he slipped his arm through mine and led me into another bunker from which practically all the coal had been taken.

I was left by myself.

Suddenly I remembered Natasha's request about the address, but it was too late. She had taken it with her....

X

I just got word that we were sailing up the Thames, approaching London. After a while I heard our steamer bringing up.

My voyage was over.

The thing now was to get ashore safely. I waited eagerly for the stokers to come for me. I was worried and excited. This was the last stage, and everything depended upon it.

I had had a bite an hour before, and somewhat fortified myself. My strength seemed to be coming back to me. I stood up, and found that I could walk, although with difficulty.

A light gleamed at the end of the bunker.

"Dmitry," Trofimov called, "come here, quick."

I approached him.

"We've been checked already," he said breathlessly. "The English custom officer has counted us. Everything's all right. They're examining the ship now. Looking for contraband. Come along."

"Where to?"

"The stokehold."

Giving me no time to collect myself, he all but dragged me along. On the way he gave me hurried instructions how to behave, and what to look out for. He reeled it all off so quickly that I could barely follow him.

"Steady now, Dmitry! Keep your nerve! The thing is not to get the wind up! No matter who comes in, take no

notice. You just go on with your job. It's only for a few minutes. After that it'll be plain sailing. Get me? With a bit of luck we may pull it off!"

We came into the stokehold. It was light and hot in there. The quivering boilers were humming their monotonous, mysterious song.

Trofimov, nervous and perspiring, slightly opened the furnace door and put a big iron bar into my hands.

"That's to poke the coals with. I'll give you the word when to start. You're supposed to be a stoker, get me? And while you're doing your do I'll start giving the gauge-glasses a blow through. You watch how we'll do them in. Well, good luck!..."

Voices speaking some foreign language sounded outside.

"Get going!" Trofimov commanded, letting the steam out with a piercing hiss.

At that moment several Englishmen trooped into the stokehold.

Overcoming my weakness, I bent down and opened the furnace door. The glare dazzled my eyes and swept over me in a hot wave. I started poking clumsily at the white-hot coals. The bar might have been an iron beam—it felt so heavy in my hands. My burnt side hurt as if someone were clawing at it. Three or four minutes passed. My strength was giving out. My head, filling with a leaden weight, felt like bursting. The furnace was a monster with fiery jaws. Everything swam before my eyes, and I felt a crushing pain at the temples. My legs suddenly buckled under me and I dropped. The fall brought me to myself with a shock of realization. My God, those men might notice I was a stranger, I thought. And then ruined for ever would be all my hopes and dreams. I would be arrested, sent back to Russia....

Pulling myself together, I rapped out a fierce oath, and repeated it with loud emphasis. Then I sat down, raised

one foot and started to examine my boot. The sense of impending danger had put me on my mettle. I could now calmly wait for the end....

"My friend! They've gone!" Trofimov yelled joyfully. He gripped my shoulders and shook me. "You're saved, I tell you! Don't you understand? May this blasted coal choke me if I'm lying!"

He whacked me on the back with his great paw, beside himself with joy.

"Whew!—you're a bag of bones, man! But never mind. You'll soon be fit again...."

It began to dawn on me that I was really saved, and a wave of happiness flooded my breast.

Trofimov took me back to the bunker and ran off at once to fetch my clothes. However, it was about two hours before he returned holding my clothes and a lamp in one hand and a pail of water in the other.

"Sorry I was so long," he said gloomily. "One chap's been arrested up there——"

"Where?"

"Aloft. They found him in one of the holds. He was lying under a tarpaulin. A workman, by the looks of him. Something under thirty, I should say. The deck-hands had fixed him up. Couldn't hide him properly, the brainless lubbers! Hell..."

"Where is he now?"

"Locked up in the cabin. Where did you think he was? That old shark of ours is glad, though. Tickled to death when he clapped eyes on the fellow. Ugh, the devil! He's taking him back. He'll hand him over to the police. But we'll see about that. He's got to get him back first.... Come on, my lad, let's get that fiz of yours in order."

It took me several minutes with the help of the stoker to get washed and change into my old clothes.

Trofimov took me to his quarters and made me sit down at the table.

"Take it easy and get your wind. If anyone sees you, just say you're visiting me, that's all."

He made me eat some soup. I had no appetite for it, and forced myself to swallow the food in order to fortify myself for the coming journey.

Finally Trofimov bandaged my burnt cheek with a clean piece of linen—it was causing me pain again after the heat of the stokehold—and said, "Well, lad, let's be heaving the hook."

We went up on deck, and, steering clear of the open hatches, made our way towards the gang-plank. I gazed eagerly at the new life all round me.

The sun was blazing in a clear pale-blue sky. The breath of spring, balmy and joyous, drew from the shore. I breathed freely and deeply for the first time.

Work was in full swing. Some ships were loading, others unloading. The dockers, big brawny men with weather-beaten faces, went about their hard tasks with such tremendous gusto that one would think they had only a few more hours to live and were anxious to get through with all their business. The laden carts moved off with a rumble of wheels on the stones, and others took their place. Steam tugs crossed the harbour, wailing plaintively as though in pain. Winches rattled. Men's shouts were drowned in the general bustle and roar of the seaport's workday. Suddenly, close at hand, a long shattering blast broke through the chaos of sounds. I looked round with a start. It was the parting hoot of a huge steamer, which was pushing off from the wharf, churning up the green turbid pool.

Land at last.... I could feel it underfoot! But I was not out of the woods yet. The thing was to get out of the docks. I was swept along as if by a wave. It seemed as if I had escaped from hell, and life, vigorous, boisterous, seething life, was giving me a warm welcome.

We passed through the gate, sleepily guarded by a policeman, burly and formidable, but as gentle as a calf, and

found ourselves in the streets of the city. We walked down a couple of blocks and turned down a narrow side street.

"Well, here we are," Trofimov said, stopping. "The world is yours."

He pulled something out of his pocket and thrust it into my hand.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Money.... You'll need it. It was the stokers' idea...."

I did not want to take the money, but he was so insistent that I was forced to give way.

"I want to tell you something, Dmitry."

He glanced round, then cleared his throat. His face grew sad.

"A man came on board. Educated man, by the looks of him. He made inquiries about——"

"About Natasha?" I said.

"Yes.... 'A friend of mine was to have come in this ship,' he says. 'A young lad. He sent me a letter before he embarked.' And he shows us the letter. It seems he had been waiting for that poor little woman three days. Must have missed her badly, by the looks of it. He buttonholed one sailor after another and asked them questions. To shake him off Petrov goes and tells him, 'Some kid or other fixed it up to sail with us; we were supposed to get him aboard in an hour, but he didn't turn up.' He made Petrov repeat the story. You should have seen how badly he took it. But he didn't say a word—just sighed, and went away. All bent up, he was, Dmitry. You'd think he was carrying a load of six poods."

We embraced each other warmly at parting. I could feel the powerful muscular arm of my rescuer on my neck.

"Maybe we'll meet again some time.... Don't forget me...."

Apparently he wanted to say something more, but words utterly failed him. All he could bring out, with a catch in his voice, was:

"Ah, well! Good luck, old man!"

"Thanks for all you've done, friend," I answered, deeply moved.

His eyes suddenly grew moist. He wrung my hand for the last time and walked back to the ship.

I looked at his broad bent back.

The last familiar person, someone near and comprehensible to me, had gone.... What lay before me? What kind of people? What kind of life would I find?

Sick in body, but buoyant in spirit, I plunged into the thick of London's turbulent torrent.

1911

THE SEA BECKONS

I

THE large passenger-boat, in which I was making my first voyage as one of the crew, had left the shores of the New World far behind her and was racing headlong towards England. The waters of the Atlantic lay becalmed under the magic spell of the morning sun, and the ship cleaved her way through them with her sharp breast, throwing up ridges of foam and, with the noise of a cataract, leaving a swirling torrent in her wake.

I was keeping my watch at the helm, holding the obedient wheel and looking intently at the round compass card, marked off into points and degrees. The ship carried a good helm, and I took care to keep her pointed on the course the mate had set me. Deep down below, the engines were sighing strenuously, driving forward the huge hulk, which could have housed a small town. The steamer was doing about twenty knots, but I wished she had still more way on her, so that we could make the English coast all the quicker. For it was there that lovely Amelia Brown was waiting for me. I breathed deeply of the fresh air, surcharged with the flavour of the sea and, screwing up my eyes against the glare, peered ahead with agitation,

gazing at the blue horizon, whence a luminous track, like molten silver, ran across the smooth gleaming sheet of the ocean straight towards the ship's bows. It looked so inviting, that I felt like racing down it. Joy and sunshine flooded my soul, my heart glowed with happiness, and the juices of life, like young wine, ran powerfully within me.

I had not seen Amelia since the previous summer, when I had signed on for a long voyage, and corresponded with her only on those rare occasions that are offered to a seaman aboard ship. I had served in a number of ships and sailed many a sea since then. I had been to new places I had never seen before, but wherever fate cast me, in weather beastly foul or delightfully fair, always in my heart I had carried the sound of that girl's sweet voice, which had made the burden of life easier for me to bear. During the last three months, however, I had had no news from her, and was beginning to worry. When almost on the verge of despair I suddenly received a long letter from her. She wrote that she missed me very much, and was dying to see me, all the more that something very important was about to take place in her life.

I guessed what she meant, and felt like shouting in a wild outburst of joy:

"I am coming, my love, never to part with you again! Can't you feel me coming on the wings of our wondership, flying like an albatross through the skies!"

The passengers, refreshed by their night's sleep, were already astir, and the fine weather drew them out on the upper deck. What a motley crowd they were! Men and women of different races and tongues, wearing the dress of all nations; poor people cruelly cheated by life, but still doggedly seeking their share of the world's good fortune; businessmen driven by the lust for gain into the remotest corners of the earth; kings of finance, steel and coal, working the levers of capitalism's monstrous machine, which

devours countless human lives; lovers of adventure, and just the idle rich—those who had money to burn, money they had not worked for. Some of the first- and second-class passengers were sitting at deck tables, drinking coffee or wine; others, their breakfast over, were strolling about the promenade deck, climbing up to the bridge and peeping into the wheel-house. I caught snatches of conversation in different languages; and the whiff of expensive perfumes mingled with the tang of the sea. I had thoughts for nothing but Amelia. In her last letter she had asked me, in passing, whether I had got my navigating officer's certificate. No, I was still studying for it, poring over special nautical books in my spare time, but in a few months I would be going up for examination. That I would succeed there could be no doubt. Soon she would see me a captain's mate.

Suddenly I heard someone speaking in my native tongue. Pleasantly surprised, I looked round. Two Russian ladies were standing on the bridge, going into raptures over the weather.

"What a lovely morning! I hardly feel the ship rolling. And look how bright the sun is! This voyage is simply wonderful! Don't you think so, Anna?"

"Yes. We shall have something to tell in Petersburg!"

Both were smartly dressed in grey-green costumes with mauve-coloured veils; both were of an age at which art, more than nature, had to be relied on for maintaining a fresh complexion.

Holding their lorgnettes to their eyes, they discussed the men, finding some handsome, others ugly. Some of the men passed muster on points alone—one for his features, another for his figure, a third for his passionate eyes. The mate, a tall well-knit American, caught their fancy most of all, however. He was pacing the navigation deck, stopping now and then to scan the horizon through the round eyes of his binoculars.

The ladies went over the mate point by point, and came to the conclusion that he was the most desirable of men. I came in for some comment, too.

"I say, Lucy, look at that funny sailor at the wheel," Anna said with a smile that revealed a flash of gold teeth.

"I don't see anything funny about him," Lucy said, putting her face closer to the window of the wheel-house.

"Did you ever see an American wearing such a walrus moustache!"

"I don't like him. His face reminds me of some animal. He isn't the least interesting."

Same to you, Madam, I mentally retorted. You're about as interesting as a mud fence.

"Oh, no, I positively disagree with you. I think he's awfully nice. Just what a real sailor should be—suntanned, strong. And look at his eyes—they have a wild burning look in them. I adore such eyes...."

Thanks for the compliment, Anna, I said to myself.

"You can tell at once he's a foreigner," Anna started off again. "A common sailor, and such an intelligent face. Not like our Russian...."

I could barely suppress my laughter.

You're both damned fools, I concluded, throwing Anna a glance which brought the colour flying to her cheeks.

"I think he understands Russian...."

"Don't be silly," said Lucy.

My countrywomen chattered on like a couple of magpies, then went away.

The sun slowly climbed the sky. It came round to starboard, threw a warm look into the windows of the wheelhouse and glanced over the nickel plating of the nautical instruments and the burnished glass of the compass with a dazzling sparkle.

The captain, dressed in gold-trimmed regulation jacket and cap, came in. He was a short, enormously fat man with big popping eyes and a face as red as if he had just

come out of a hot steam bath. Involuntarily I braced myself and looked harder at the compass-card. After asking how much the ship had done and what her speed was, he stood for a while scanning the horizon through his binoculars, then quietly disappeared.

Once more I held the ship on her course with but a fraction of my mind, while my thoughts were drawn back again to Amelia. I tried to recapture her image, her figure in a dress, but it eluded me. The vivid memory of our first meeting eclipsed everything else.

I made her acquaintance the previous summer quite by accident and under rather unusual circumstances. It was, I remember, a hot day, and the sea was placid, drowsy with the heat of the midday sun. I was swimming a good distance away from the shore and felt a surge of energy and fresh strength pulsing in every muscle. A crimson fillet on the head of a woman swimmer was coming towards me. I could make out the woman's narrow rounded shoulders, her shapely neck and emerald-green eyes in a face slightly wan with fatigue. In that setting of limpid green water, with the flood of sunlight gilding her fresh body and the glittering sprays dropping from her arms at each stroke like gems, she seemed to me a beautiful sea-nymph, a dream-creature. I was swept off my feet. A sudden impulse seized me to do something that would draw her attention to me. Pretending to be played out, I began to thrash about wildly and went under, striking out in her direction. A moment later I popped up on the surface right next to her.

"Oh, what a turn you gave me!" she gasped. "I thought you were drowning."

Alarm still lingered in her dilated eyes which were turned full upon me. Her quivering lips, which she tried to force into a smile, were still white.

"I'm sorry I frightened you, miss, but I was feeling a bit queer. In such cases I always dive under the water."

"No, really! And does it help?"

"You'd be surprised!"

She laughed heartily, and the colour came surging back into her cheeks.

"And how do you feel now?"

"Tiptop. Ready to make a voyage round the world."

I swam ahead of her, then faced round towards her and began to swim backwards with my arms aloft and only my legs working in an upright posture.

She looked at me with wondering eyes.

"You're a sailor?"

"How clever of you to have guessed."

"How long have you been following the sea?"

"About ten years."

"In what capacity?"

"Ordinary seaman."

I caught a look of disappointment on her face.

"But I'm studying for navigating officer, miss," I started inventing. "When I pass my examination I'll be first mate, then captain."

"Oh, I see!" she exclaimed, brightening. "That's splendid. What a shame I'm not a man. I'd sign on right away. I'm so fond of the sea."

"I can tell that by your eyes, miss."

Her eyebrows went up interrogatively.

"They remind me of the sea in the tropics."

She laughed, then asked, "You're a foreigner, aren't you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Your English could be better."

"It's as good as your Russian, I daresay."

We had started that fascinating, thrilling game, which made the world seem sunnier and more enchanting than it was.

"Try and catch me!" I said, and started off as fast as I could without my hands touching the water.

She tried, but finding she could not keep up with me, drew her finely arched brows together in a frown.

"I'll take you in tow if you like!" I laughed, stopping.

"I can do without your help, thanks," she said crossly, and started to swim away.

I followed her with a puzzled look, annoyed with myself, then, in an imperious voice that did not sound like my own, I shouted, "I'll be here tomorrow at the same time, miss!"

She did not reply, but the next day and the day after that found her bathing in the same spot. We met like old friends. We introduced ourselves to each other and exchanged addresses. I would have liked to meet Amelia ashore, but my ship was going on a long voyage and I had to go away. I felt, though, that this woman was to play a big part in my life.

I had the same feeling now, as I was standing watch in the wheel-house of the American steamer, which cleaved the surface of the Atlantic with her sharp prow. I was happy, deliriously happy in every atom of my being at the thought that I would soon be seeing Amelia again. The mate noticed it, too. He came up to me, saying:

"What are you smiling for all the time?"

"Nothing, sir," I said, taken aback, and chased the smile from my face.

In the shining blue wilderness of ocean and sky, we sometimes saw the smoke of passing ships. When we came within hailing distance and spoke each other, the passengers waving handkerchiefs to one another, I too greeted them mentally as messengers from the land where my sea-nymph dwelt. My heart throbbed in a wild tumult at the knowledge that every sigh of the steel engines working incessantly deep down in the ship's bowels, every stroke of the screw blades churning the water under her stern, were bringing us nearer and nearer to each other.

"You're hanging on the wheel as if you're propping up the ship!" the mate said sternly. "Can't you stand straight!"

"Yes, sir!"

The sun was shining on the port beam. The ship's bells struck twelve, and the next watch came up to relieve the deck. I passed the wheel over to another helmsman and went below to have my meal. As I was threading my way among the passengers on the deck I met the two Russian ladies who had been discussing me on the bridge.

"Look, there's that nice sailor of yours, Anna," Lucy said with an ironical laugh, when I had drawn level with them.

"Isn't he sweet!" the other said, raising her lorgnette with a winning smile.

"Beg your pardon, madam," I said in Russian with a straight face, "were you speaking to me?"

"Oh!" the women cried, reddening to the roots of their hair and dropping their lorgnettes. They looked at me as if they had seen a ghost.

I passed on, lingering for a minute on deck at the hatchway leading to the crew's quarters. The whole boundless expanse of the ocean and fathomless sky were filled with the gorgeous play of sunny azure-tinted gleams, which lit up within me a glowing rainbow of hope.

II

The day before there had been a shower with a violent wind, but today it was calm, and the March sun was shining brightly, shedding warmth and joy around. The sky was blue with the intense hues of spring, and the remnants of yesterday's clouds, gleaming with the whiteness of fresh snow, melted in it lingeringly. The seaport stretching along the coast looked more cheerful, too, with

its waste of barrack-like houses under red-tiled roofs, the factories and mills of the suburbs, and the great noisy harbour whose stone-clad quayside bristled with the masts and funnels of crowded shipping. The sea, too, was calming down under the caressing sunbeams, and only a long lazy swell rolled across its surface with a far-off ripple of polished steel, rocking our light boat with a rhythmic motion, as if lulling it to sleep. Boats could be seen moving in different directions, but they were far away from us. I plied the oars, without thought of direction, and had eyes for nothing but my companion, who sat in the stern sheets. With emerald-green eyes in a blushing face, playful and capricious as the sea itself, she was handling the rudder skilfully. Her pretty head with fair silky curls peeping out from under her straw hat was thrown back, and she sat watching with a smile the flight of the sea-gulls as they wheeled, crying, above us.

"Don't they look lovely in the blue sky!"

"Gulls are the seaman's favourite birds. They are our constant companions in all our sea wanderings. None of us would ever dare to shoot them."

"Why not?"

I told her the legend of how the souls of seamen who died at sea passed into the bodies of gulls, and how those birds afterwards followed men's ships and warned them by their cries of an approaching storm.

She listened without interrupting, still gazing into the clear blue depths of the sky.

"Oh, I wish I could turn myself into a gull," Amelia murmured wistfully after a long silence.

"Why?"

"I would fly after the ship in which the seaman of my heart was sailing. Every morning, at sunrise, I would send him my greeting by a special kind of call."

I sat up, thrilled.

"Have you such a seaman?"

"Of course I have."

"Who is the lucky man?"

"The one I am mad about."

She looked at me with shining eyes, and it seemed to me that the breath of spring emanated not from the sun, but from her, slim, fresh and vivid, so charming and unaffected in her simple navy-blue suit and brown shoes. I stopped rowing and trailed the oars.

"No, seriously, Miss Brown, tell me who he is—be frank for once."

"Can't you guess?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Put on your thinking cap."

"It won't help just the same."

"Oh, you're so slow on the uptake, Mr. Anton!" (She used this form of address because my surname was too difficult to remember, she said.)

Saying this, she sent a peal of merry laughter rippling across the waters.

I knew she meant me, but I also knew that I had a rival, a lean Englishman, who worked as salesman in a first-class store. He was a good-looking man and always smartly dressed. He found favour in her parents' eyes, and they were prepared to give their consent to the marriage the moment he proposed. I had learned this only now, upon my return, from the mouth of one of her friends, a chatty girl to whom I had been introduced two days before. And although Amelia, as her friend assured me, was but half in love with that Englishman, I was beginning to fear that when she compared him with me, an awkward fellow with work-roughened hands, she would give him preference. Besides, she was a bit disappointed that I was not yet a navigating officer, and apparently had doubts I ever would be one. That is why I often had a suspicion that she was merely playing with me—encouraging me one minute, and driving me to de-

spair the next. At such moments I suffered the agonies of the damned. The sunshine would go out of the world, leaving behind a sense of utter desolation. But not for long. Her lovely face had but to light up with its warm sunny smile for the invisible threads she had twined round the roots of my heart to tighten and hold me fast again in the enchanted bonds of tender captivity.

Now that Amelia had broached the subject herself, I thought it a good opening to declare my love. But she seemed to guess what was coming. She leaned over and gazed into the limpid water with a grave thoughtful air, her hand trailing idly over the side.

"I haven't heard from my brother for ever so long," she said with a sigh. "I wonder if he's still alive."

I knew from her letters that she had a brother, Bill Brown, who was sailing before the mast.

"Why shouldn't he be? He's all right, and feeling quite at home at sea, I'm sure."

"I'm worried about him."

"What made him go to sea?"

"He quarrelled with Father and Mother. They wanted him to go into business after he graduated from college, but he refused. He wanted to become an engineer. There was a row. Bill left home. He hasn't written Father and Mother a word these last five years. He comes here sometimes, but he never visits the house. He writes to me once in a while. I'm awfully fond of him. He's such a clever boy."

The swell, like a weary sigh, rocked us gently on its heaving bosom.

Amelia looked towards the harbour, where a huge liner was putting out with shrill blasts of her horn.

"My father is an Englishman and my mother a Frenchwoman," Amelia said musingly. "He brought her over from Algiers. Eloped with her. I wish somebody did that to me—took me somewhere to the world's end. I've

always wanted to travel. The sight of a ship going out always gives me such a thrill."

This was news to me, since all I had previously known about her parents was that they kept a greengrocery and could barely make ends meet.

"Couldn't I do that for you, Miss Brown?" I said.

"Why not? But you'd have to abduct me."

"I'd like to see the man who'd do that and live to tell the tale."

She laughed, a gay provocative laugh, brimful of irresistible youth and vitality.

"I'll try it, though. But not until I become ship's mate. It will be easier to abduct you then."

"Yes, but when is that going to be?"

Her doubt pained me.

"Soon, soon!" I all but shouted. "Take my word, I will be mate! When a man wants a thing strong enough he always gets it. I'll tell you about myself, something of my history. The village I was born in had no school. I got my first schooling from the psalm-reader. He was so old that his grey hair started growing green, like moss. His method of teaching was an old one too—he beat knowledge into my head with a stick. All I learned from him was the alphabet. But I had a remarkable father. He was an ignorant man himself, but he nailed one idea into my head by constantly repeating: 'An unlearned head is like a lantern without a light....' All my parents bequeathed to me when they died was great physical strength, good blood and guts. Not a penny besides—God bless them. After that I struck out for myself. When I came to town I started to learn to read from the street signs, and afterwards I began to use the public libraries. I dreamt of going to the university and would have graduated it if I hadn't discovered a passion for the sea. Do you mean to say I won't be able to master the sea sciences?"

I went on to tell her what difficulties stood in the way of my studying for navigating officer, and waxed excited.

"All right, Mr. Anton," she said at last, interrupting me. "I believe you and I agree to wait. I was just teasing you. I like you better when you're angry."

"Oh you do, do you!"

She had displayed the same old whim the day before, when we went out for a run in a sailing-boat in a pretty strong breeze and rain, and got drenched and chilled. With a sudden air of boredom she had started to play about with the jib. I warned her several times about the risk of capsizing and then, losing my temper, shouted at her angrily to stop fooling, and snatched the sheet out of her hands. Her gay mischievous laugh had sent a warm tingle through my chilled veins. The incident had put her in a good humour for the rest of our outing. We changed places, Amelia taking the oars and I the rudder. Slim and supple, she pulled a long easy stroke, like a real seaman.

I told her about Russia, about the different countries I had visited, and the people I had met. What interested her most, however, was sea life. She was pretty well informed—through her brother, no doubt—and asked me many questions about ship routine.

"How I envy you, sailing all the seas."

"Yes, Miss Brown, it's a wonderful experience, although sometimes we have a very hard time. If I were a king with autocratic powers I'd issue a drastic law obliging every person of both sexes to sail before the mast for a year or two; then you wouldn't have any weak, sickly people, molly-coddles, and miserable whimperers. I can't stand sloppiness in people. Coming to grips with a gale on the high seas is the best cure for such a failing."

Rocking in our boat, we chatted in a desultory way about whatever entered our mind, and it was with regret that I watched the sun rolling all too swiftly down the sky.

We closely overtook a drifting boat in the stern sheets of which sat a pair of cuddling lovers, their oars shipped. But I did not envy them—not in the least! Let love blossom everywhere, shedding light and joy for people while they were still young, while their hot blood had not turned into sour milk, and their hearts puckered up like dry apples. True, my intimacy with Amelia had not yet advanced to such a stage—my love for her was as chaste as that solitary snow-white cloudlet that looked down upon us out of the softly woven blue of the spring sky. Her mere presence, her amused tender smile, and the provocative glance of her emerald eyes made me happy with a brimming joy, like a tropical sea awakening to the sparkle of morning with jets of sunshine.

We returned ashore late in the evening. Amelia was rather upset when she heard that I had escaped to England from a Russian prison. It was no use my trying to explain to her the difference between political offenders and criminals—she could not grasp it. She took leave of me rather coldly.

III

Evening. I roamed the beach alone, long after the appointed hour, waiting impatiently for Amelia to appear from the street leading down to the sea-shore. But there was no sign of her.

A north-wester was blowing hard, driving up masses of tumbled clouds that cluttered the sky like soiled cotton wool. Foam-tipped waves, looking like vast herds of white rabbits, rolled across the bleak grey sea. The breakers flung themselves far up on the beach with a roar, weaving fantastic lace patterns of froth in the water. Fishing smacks in the offing could be seen hurrying inshore to escape the brewing storm before nightfall.

I walked along the water's edge, glancing frequently at my watch. The gambolling wind got under my light

open coat, bellied the skirts, groped about my body with chill fingers, tore my blue tie out of my waistcoat and whipped the ends of it into my face. But I saw and felt nothing. The tang of the sea and the seaweeds washed ashore no longer stirred me the way they used to.

"She loves me, too—I am sure of it," I said to myself. "Then why doesn't she come? Scared at my having been in prison, or trying to make up her mind between me and the Englishman?"

Day was dying slowly, and sombre night closed in around, merging sea and sky. A lighthouse in the roads, looming white and ghostly, flashed on and off at regular intervals, flinging red darts of flame into the blind distance. A drizzle started. The wind was strengthening, and the running surf dashed still higher up the beach, surging around the impassive earth with an angry story about the sea's dark mysteries.

No, she would not come....

In despair, I walked back to town, where the lights were already going up. I went slowly, with a chill at my heart. I did not want to go home—there, in my square of a room, I would feel more miserable than ever. Mechanically I went in the direction of Amelia's house and walked slowly up and down on the other side of the street. I still hoped against hope that I would meet my girl with the emerald eyes.

The wind drove a stinging drizzle into my face; water ran gurgling down the drain-pipes; the shining roadway and pavements reflected the lights of the electric lamps, threading down the streets in two golden festoons. Occasionally a tram-car rattled past, shooting a spray of mud from under its wheels. The multicoloured lights of advertising signs flashed on and off over the houses. In all the hurrying crowd there was not a single person I knew.

Misery, like a sticky web, wrapped itself round my heart, extinguishing the joy of life, and plunging the world in gloom. I told myself that Amelia had been kept indoors by the bad weather or that she was perhaps unwell, but the thought nevertheless rankled, invidious and tormenting, that I had been fooled, fooled to the top of my bent, that the sweet song of my love had broken off and would remain unsung.

It was already late. The noise of the traffic was dying down; the city, its energies spent in the daily round, was sinking into sleep.

Suddenly, on the other side of the street, I saw the familiar figure of a woman. She was walking arm in arm with a man, her body pressed close to his.

Amelia!

Cold, wet with rain, I leaned against a wall to keep myself from falling. At the front door of her house he kissed her good-night, kissed my Amelia, who offered her lips to him. Then he walked away, flushed with victory and pride, his heels clicking on the stone pavement.

"It wasn't me, it was a navigating officer she was after," I muttered, staggering away from the wall.

And strange to say—like a hurt child that runs to its mother, so did I, a grown-up man with strong nerves and hard muscles, steeled in the battle with life's adversities, run off to the sea, as if there alone, upon her stern and loving bosom, would I find the comfort I sought. In the poor quarter near the docks haunted by prostitutes and down-and-outs, I dropped into a pub to escape, at least for a time, the effort of realization. The air was blue with tobbaco smoke, heavy with that peculiar pungent odour of the tavern; the figures of seamen, dock labourers, and women wandered, lurching and jostling, between the bar and the tables squeezed into tiny compartments. A burly Englishman with a fat chin presided behind the bar in his shirt-sleeves, barely managing, with the aid of two

boy assistants, to open the bottles and draw the beer off into large mugs. A drunken clamour, punctuated by raucous shouts, laughter and shrill female voices, filled the air, through the reeking fumes of which the electric lights looked like so many yellow smudges seen through a fog. I was no lover of alcohol, but now when my teeth were chattering, when the sense of desolation from which I had so long been free lay upon my heart like a stone, I gladly swallowed the fiery whisky. Someone slapped me on the back and a familiar voice said, "Hullo, pal! How d'you do? What has driven you to these shores?"

Before me, with feet planted wide apart, stood my old shipmate Jackson, a bull-headed Negro, built like a huge rough-hewn block of black marble.

"Sit down," I said, and ordered another glass.

"What's up?"

"Have a drink."

I had made friends with Jackson, as plucky a seaman and true a comrade as ever trod a ship's deck, while sailing together in an English vessel. His left eye, set in a framework of deep scars, kept winking all the time as if he were sharing a joke with somebody. It was a reminder of riotous days spent on the Island of Madeira. I remember him starting an argument there over some woman with a seaman off another ship, a fair-haired Norwegian. The fellow smashed a bottle across his face, and I had to haul him back to the ship like a bag of meal.

Delighted to see me, he sat gravely pouring pepper and salt into his glass, then added a generous dose of mustard, filled his glass up with whisky and beer, and stirred the concoction with his finger. The result was a brownish slushy fluid, somewhat resembling brewer's yeast, which he called "bottled earthquake." He smacked his lips with relish as he drank it and waved his fat-fingered hands in the air as he spoke.

"As soon as the passage was over I went on the razzle-dazzle. Kept it up three days and nights running.... And now I'm on the rocks. Stone-broke."

"Never mind, Jackson, I can let you have some money."

"Thanks, old chap, you always were a good pal, but I don't need any money. All I want is a snack and this bottled earthquake to wash it down with."

Life's dissolute dregs seethed all round us in a hilarious muddy vortex, yelling, swearing, singing, hiccupping, whistling and haggling with the women.

Just as we were beginning to let ourselves go, they started closing the pub. The people drifted out, grumbling and cursing; some had to be bundled out. The crowd lingered outside, as though expecting the doors to be opened again. Bedraggled bleary-eyed women danced before their beaux with hitched-up skirts, twisting their bodies in obscene movements and shouting ribaldry in raucous voices. Then the whole drunken mob oozed away, like sticky mud, into the dark back streets of the wharfside slums.

Taking with us whisky, beer and snacks, the Negro and I spent the rest of the night on the beach.

It had stopped raining. Stars twinkled here and there through the torn veil of clouds, and a half-moon would appear for a minute, flood-lighting the grey watery plain, then vanish again as if swallowed up in a black void. The wind was blowing harder, however, singing in a shrill straining note and ruffling the sea in its swift race. The surf pounded doggedly upon the beach, as if grappling with some adversary it was bent on overcoming.

In the harbour, which was flooded with lights, activities did not cease even at night. Ships were going out, others coming in to take their place, rending the darkness with the howl of sirens and a chorus of whistles.

We were both tipsy, but still went on drinking. We took swigs straight out of the bottle.

"You'll be sorry, Amelia, but it'll be too late!" I shouted at the town in anguish, clutching my befuddled head in both hands.

"Oh, that? To hell with it!" Jackson said. "Let's sign on—you'll get over it soon. Same thing happened to me once. I had a crush on an African gal. Real beauty she was: thick soft lips, fuzzy hair, breasts like two big globes, and a belly you couldn't get both arms round. And was she shiny—like a black star!"

I looked up and stared at him. He sat rocking to and fro, a dark misshapen shadow.

"A black star?"

"Yes.... I went to sea and got over it. I've got used to the white men now. At first it was hell, though."

The Negro let out a stream of curses in all the European languages.

The lonely lighthouse threw its red darts into the black night.

"All right, Jackson, let's sign on together."

"Fine! Now you're talking!"

I told him that I was studying to become navigating officer and would soon be going up for my examination.

Jackson showed his white teeth in a grin of joy, wrung my hand, and yelled, "Isn't that swell! I'll come and serve under you."

"We'll show her, the giddy flirt!" I said, pointing townwards.

"You bet!"

The Negro spat out a full-flavoured oath and shook his fist at the town.

The rest was like a confused, hazy dream. All I remember was that we sat there chattering all night, then staggered off in the morning arm in arm to the Sailors' Home where we signed on in the first ship that turned up.

IV

The steam tug, whistling shrilly and dodging in and out of the crowded shipping, hauled our three-masted sailing vessel, bearing the high-sounding name of *Neptune* out of the harbour.

Clad in my sailor's clothes, I stood on the upper deck among a group of seamen, all utter strangers to me. They were a bedraggled, sorry-looking lot, but bore themselves with a swagger, and were full of spirit and dash. My head felt like bursting, although it was already well past noon, and I was very sleepy after my all-night spree. The weather was clearing up, and the wind, after a long junketing spell, was easing. Every now and then the sun peeped out from behind the malachite-tinted clouds, building nests of fire in the plate-glass windows of the luxurious steamers, flooding the red tiles of the city roofs, unveiling distant vistas and dancing on the undulating surface of the sea. The next moment everything grew sombre again. Sky and sea would lie brooding, as if resentful of each other, but everywhere work was in full swing, life was seething. Steam engines rumbled on the wharfside, strings of freight cars shuttled in and out of the warehouses, winches clattered, filling and emptying ship's holds, hammers rang against iron, launches whistled, and big steamers hooted as if hailing one another. All sounds mingled and floated over the harbour in a single powerful song of labour. There was a smell of petroleum, of coal smoke, machine oil and southern fruits.

We threaded our way among thousands of vessels, large and small, steam-propelled and sail-driven, of every conceivable design, flying multicoloured flags of all nations, until we got out upon the highroad. I had but one wish—to get out to sea as quickly as possible, out of sight of that city where I had left a broken heart.

"Some bus, this *Neptune* of ours," one of the sailors said.

"A grand-daughter of Noah's ark," another commented.

Everyone laughed.

For a moment my eyes rested on a seaman who was sweeping the deck. He was Jim Harrison. We had signed on together. He was a broken-down old man with a wrinkled face covered with stiff stubble. His eyes alone, under tufted brows, looked out with a youthful sparkle, keen as a hawk's. He had been sailing before the mast just a few months short of fifty years. On our way to the ship he had complained:

"I'm afraid I won't pass muster. I'm fed up with sitting in that sailors' home, darn it. I wish it at the bottom of the sea with hungry devils breakfasting off the whole management! The sea draws me. I can't keep away from it any longer. Mind you, I can still work. Got plenty of go in me yet."

Jackson had slapped him on the back, saying:

"Come off it, Jim. You're not much of a worker, you know, but you'll pass in a crowd. You just keep your head up in the ship, don't bend your back. My pal here will keep your steam perked up for you."

On our way to the ship we had dropped in at two pubs where I had stood Jim and Jackson drinks.

And now, as he was sweeping the deck, the old man tried his best to show what a hard-working seaman he was. But even this work was too much for him.

The bells struck almost simultaneously on all the ships, sending a medley of deep-tongued peals echoing through the harbour.

Jackson came towards me with a rolling gait, his thick rubbery lips turned out in a grin, and shouted in a gruff, drink-ruined voice:

"Oh, there you are! I've prepared your berth for you in the crew's quarters. We'll sleep together. We've only got one blanket."

"Thanks, old chap."

We were approaching the breakwater, built of heavy blocks of granite—the mute guardian protecting the entrance to the harbour against the onslaught of the enraged seas with its mighty stone breast.

The boatswain, a thickset man of middle age with a big lumpy head set firmly upon broad shoulders—he seemed to have no neck at all—leaned over the hatch and shouted down:

"Tumble up here!"

The few sailors who happened to be below scrambled up on the deck.

The boatswain, with his head thrown back, kept his eye all the time on the captain—a very tall, morose man strolling up and down the bridge—and at a sign from him he turned to us a battered face with a broken nose that had received many a beating in its day, and commanded, "Lay aloft! Set the sails!"

Jackson and I, with some other seamen, sprang aloft and got busy trimming the yards, while the rest of the crew on the deck laid the ropes down clear for running.

Being new to the ship and her established routine, we fumbled with the sail trimming for an incredibly long time, drawing down upon our heads the curses of the exasperated boatswain, who ran up and down the ship like a restless hyena.

The tug cast off the tow-line and puffed back to harbour, and the *Neptune*, with tight-packed holds, quivered throughout her frame as the large white sheets of canvas took in the wind, and her rigging began to hum as if she were awakening from a long lethargy. At last she was under way, and, taking advantage of a fair wind, was soon bowling along with a buoyant lift, steering a course for Alexandria.

"Let's go below and get a nap," said Jackson, when our work was done. "Our watch comes on at twelve."

"I'll stay on deck for a while."

"Just as you like. I've had enough of it."

Then, seeing Jim, he said to him, "Well, old hoss, it's not so bad here, eh?"

"We'll see about that when we get back."

"You said it, damn your bloody eyes!"

They went below.

The land steadily receded, and the sea unrolled before the ship's bows, alluring, full of unknown promise. The city and the vast harbour lost their sharp outlines and dwindled away, as if melting in the misty air. Suddenly I felt a wild yearning for the place where I had left my dream-girl. I felt like shouting up at the bridge, "Captain! I don't want to serve on your confounded ship!" and then diving headlong into the cold sea and swimming back to the shore.

But no, that would never be! Hot anguish might boil in my heart like the black pitch that is poured on a ship's seams, but never would I return to that city unless it was to take my books and things which I had left in my lodgings. For a time I felt strengthened in my resolve.

I went aft, where a red-haired Englishman, tall and self-possessed, with large, somewhat thick ears—they looked frost-bitten—was standing talking to a small but very wiry Japanese with a bronzed face.

"What are your names?" I asked, smiling.

They answered almost in one voice:

"Alec Shellow."

"Kimanodzi."

"Fine. Let's be friends. My name's Anton. Looks like we're going to have a nice run, doesn't it? I'm glad I got into this ship."

Two pairs of eyes—one like blued steel, darting about in oblique slits, the other grey, moist, and shining as if

swimming in oil—went over me searchingly from head to foot.

"Well," drawled red-haired Alec. "If a fellow has nothing more to look forward to in this life, then I daresay sailing this pig's trough of a boat would strike him as pleasant."

I laughed and moved off, leaving them puzzled.

For a moment Shellow's face had struck me as being familiar—I had seen that man somewhere. I looked closely at his red, shining face, with its sprinkling of freckles, but it told me nothing. The deep scar on his left cheek, which looked like a knife gash, baffled me.

The boatswain was still dashing about, yelling orders to the men of the watch to taut haul a sail here and loosen another there. Here, out in the open sea, the wind blew stronger, whistling in the rigging and stiffening the sails that ran upwards in tiers. The city was a grey speck, then it, too, disappeared, and all that remained were the sea and the sky. White-breasted sea-gulls wheeled, crying, round the *Neptune*, now shooting ahead of her, now dropping astern.

Good-bye, Amelia!

I went below, my head a whirl of painful thoughts.

V

Life on board the *Neptune*, as on all other ships of her class, was a gruelling round. We worked like galley-slaves, and lived on sea biscuits, hard and dry as stones, weak coffee with condensed milk, and meat so salty that it might have been pickling at the bottom of the sea for hundreds of years; in very rough weather, when the galley range was not heated, we had to put up with cold tinned meat. It was the kind of berth that only men who were hard up and had squandered all their money on drink, or, like me, were past caring what happened to them, could

have signed up for. Many of the crew, of course, would throw up their berths at the first port we made, forfeiting their pay, which they did not receive until the voyage was over. They would run away in the hope of getting a berth in a steamship, where there was less risk, easier work, and better food. But there would be no difficulty in replacing them by other drunken, hungry wasters, eager to take a job on any ship.

Little by little the crew shook down into their places and got used to the routine. Work went with a livelier swing, but the ship was undermanned. A crew of twenty-two were not enough for handling a vessel like the *Neptune*. In fitful weather, when the wind constantly shifted, now suddenly letting go, now coming on squally, we had no peace day or night. Often, after standing out the watch, we would be piped up again before we had barely tumbled into our bunks to furl royals, take in reefs, brace the yards, or shorten sail. We had the worst time of it on stormy nights, when everything around was so dark that you were likely to break your neck at any moment, when a howling, blustering wind chilled you to the very marrow, and the rain came down in merciless torrents from a sooty-black sky, drenching you to the skin. At such moments it seemed as if the sun would never rise again to disperse the wet reeking murk, pressing down on the roaring surface of the Atlantic. The drenched shivering sailors grumbled and swore.

"This is hell afloat!"

"What a blasted ship!"

"Yes, a year's run in a tub like this will kill a man's appetite for the tarts all right, if it doesn't kill him."

But as soon as the weather broke the crew's mood changed. A fine morning is especially welcome after a stormy night, for then the sailors, perhaps for the thousandth time, steal admiring glances eastward, where day is breaking in splashes of crimson, painting the un-

dulating and still foaming sheet of water with glowing colours, and where the sun, throwing off its shining mantles ranging in hues from brilliant scarlet to saffron-gold, rises a gorgeous flaming disk. Even red-headed Shellow, who, it had seemed to me, cared for nothing but his food and drink, could not suppress a smile as he cocked his eye at the radiant face of the sky.

"The best thing in the world for us, seamen, is a kindly sun," he would say.

"Give me a bottle of brandy any time," one of the crew would throw in with a laugh.

"The reason we like brandy is only because it's a bit of the same sun in liquid form," Shellow would retort.

The man who had the worst time of it aboard was Jim Harrison. He was unable to do anything aloft and went about his work on deck listlessly, with a slow tread, bending beneath the weight of hard-lived years. The first day out he had a row with the boatswain.

"Hi, old man!"

Jim was dragging the ropes along the deck when the boatswain hailed him. He dropped the coil and said, "What do you want?"

"You're not walking, you're crawling about like a wet wood-louse in the family way!"

Jim flared up and snapped back, "And you're rushing about like a scalded cat."

The boatswain, totally unprepared for such an answer, jerked his head back as if he had received a blow on the forehead.

For a moment they stood eyeing each other silently, as if they had just met; one, clean-shaven, bursting with health and vigour, clad in a leather wind-breaker, wide trousers of dark blue flannel, and heavy brogues, the other barefooted, in rags, an old dog who had had his day but still clung to life with a swagger-born of despair,

"All right, I'll have something to say to you when we make the next port. Get on with your work."

Jim knew what that meant—the sack. He went on dragging the ropes about the deck, muttering in a threatening tone, "I've got a daisy of a knife! Cuts meat like butter. . . ."

"And I've got something better still—a shooter. At a distance of twenty paces I'll never miss such a small target as a man's head."

"When you hunt big game you've got to get your beast before he gets you."

Jim Harrison put on a brave front before the boatswain, but to us, his shipmates, he frankly admitted with grim humour, as if he were speaking of someone else:

"Yes, boys, I'm played out. A worn-out old crock. But just the same, I won't go back to the Sailors' Home, not for anything in the world."

"What will you do, then?" we asked him.

"We'll see. . . ."

Our skipper was a fearless seaman, but something of a crank. Every hour, day and night, the ship's cook, a canny Scot, who was turning a not altogether honest penny out of the crew's food, brought him hot coffee in a nickel-plated coffee-pot. The captain diluted it with rum in equal proportions and swallowed it in utter silence. He spoke very little, chiefly to the boatswain or his mate, a young man with startled-looking eyebrows in an ugly face, at whom he would growl a brief order, his head turned away as if he despised them. Going up on the poop or returning to his state-room aft, he looked at no one and trod the deck as if he were measuring it, staring down at his feet with a heavy brooding look. He was a striking figure—tall, burly and angular; a livid face with bags under dull staring eyes, and a massive rapacious nose; he shaved often, but his neck, strong as a bull's,

was thickly covered with hair; he gave one the impression that, stripped naked, his body would be all shaggy.

"Beelzebub's Brother," Shellow had dubbed him the very first day, and this nickname had stuck to him.

He was so absent-minded that one day he came up on the poop after his breakfast with the napkin still under his chin and stood the whole watch without being aware of it.

The crew's quarters were forward. A passage divided it into two separate compartments partitioned off with boards—one for each watch. It was a small, dirty place, reeking with tobacco smoke and body smells, with two portholes of thick green glass, common bunks for sleeping and sitting, and a long table screwed down to the deck. While the cold thick weather lasted, we spent our time off duty down here, warming ourselves round the iron stove, which was heated with coal.

Although we were a mixed crew from all over the world, representing different races, there was no discord among us. Indeed, how could there be, when the conditions of life were the same for all?

The things one hears when the crew gather below after their watch! They curse the government, mock the religious rites of all countries, but for the most part compare notes about different ships, praising some and damning others, spin yarns about their adventures in the port dens and about the number of times they fooled the customs by smuggling goods ashore.

But most of all I loved to listen to old Jim, who had survived several shipwrecks in his day. He believed in neither God nor the devil but, like most seamen, was very superstitious. Lying on the bunk next to me and Jackson, he held forth in an earnest tone:

"Once during a shipwreck I knew beforehand I'd survive. It was a sort of intuition."

"How did you know?" we asked him.

"Quite simple.... I was sailing in a merchant steamer. She was such an old tub, that the boilers shifted through stress of weather. Naturally, the engine had to be shut down and the steam turned off. The wind started driving us towards the Norwegian coast. When the crew suddenly saw the cliffs right on top of us, they just gasped. Nothing could save us. It was wicked weather, the wind howled and blustered like a crazy drunkard. The cliffs seemed to be rushing at us. I'll never forget it...."

Jim gave an old man's cough, then went on unhurriedly, puffing at his pipe:

"All of a sudden I hears a child crying. I strained my ears, listening to the roar of the gale. I got a nasty shock. I could clearly make out the voice of my daughter, a four-year-old, whose mother was a Hindu girl from Ceylon. Just before that I sent her a letter and half a quid. I dashed about the ship like a madman, and her voice grew clearer all the time—crying, calling me, she was. At last it struck me that if I heard the voice of a living person, not a dead one, then I'd remain alive. I put a lifebelt on. The cliffs kept coming nearer. Another few minutes and there came a splintering sound. Our ship just went to pieces. I was thrown overboard before I knew what had happened. Luckily I dropped into a narrow gap between two cliffs, and afterwards the sea cast me up on the beach. Only four of us out of thirty lived to tell the story...."

"How many bottles did you have before the shipwreck, Jim?" Shellow asked sarcastically.

"No matter how many I had, I was never such an addle-brain as you are," the old man growled.

"It doesn't need much brain to wag a long tongue," Shellow said imperturbably.

They often argued and bickered, and sometimes ended in swearing at each other, but always remained good friends.

In the other corner a black-moustached Spaniard waved his arms about excitedly.

"What we want," he said, "is a squall to sweep right through the world and knock the old order of things keel upwards. And then we'd start building life—not this miserable life we're living now. . . ."

Many voiced their approval. Jackson jumped up and shouted:

"That's the stuff! Full speed ahead at thirty knots! Only don't touch the pubs, ships, and women!"

The Spaniard, ignoring him, continued, "And that time will come, it will come soon!"

"Yes, when the sharks start singing like nightingales. In the meantime they're gobbling us chaps down whole," Shellow put in.

Gradually I began to recover from the blow I had received in England. Amelia was less often in my thoughts now. The gay rollicking humour of the sailors' talk took me out of myself. Only when they began to speak about their sweethearts and the prospect of meeting them again, did the old pain and yearning for those emerald eyes grip my heart. At such times my thronging thoughts gave me no sleep. The lamp burned low, swaying on its chain, and throwing flickering ghostly shadows on the bulkheads of our gloomy cabin. The sailors were fast asleep in their bunks, snoring loudly, while I tossed about on the hard mattress on which I lay next to the Negro under a single blanket.

The ship lurched from side to side, as she dropped into a sea-way. Every time she did so, my legs flew up, while my head was somewhere down below. The waves pounded against the hull in a frenzy, and the growling, heaving sea could be felt frightfully, appallingly near at hand. From above came the hostile dismal song of the wind. A crushing sense of misery gripped my heart. I had but one desire at such moments—to be called aloft

as quickly as possible. I would leap from my bunk at the first order, tumble up on deck, swiftly climb aloft, and there, face to face with the furious wind, in a darkness black as ink, where one makes things out by instinct rather than sight, I would turn to with a wild and reckless abandon. Like a circus acrobat doing his turn before an audience, I would start my desperate game, thrilled by my own audacity, then, weary, snuffed out, I would return below and fall asleep like a log.

VI

Our ship was in the Mediterranean.

This was the first night since I had signed up on her that I was keeping the watch with practically nothing to do. I just sauntered about the upper deck, seeing that the sails did not flap.

A light breeze was fanning the backstay, humming softly in the web of rigging and in the curves of the bellying sails. The *Neptune* slipped through the water at a steady run, her spars and masts creaking rhythmically. The warm southern night spread its black transparent wings, jealously embracing the sea, which had gone as black as pitch. Wavelets rolled rippling across the sea with a musical splash and a low good-humoured growling, like a kind old man grumbling at the pranks of his dearly beloved children. The sky overhead throbbed and pulsed with starlight all the way to the horizon, dropping streaming threads of gold into the dark depths of the water.

In thick weather, when I threw myself into the hard work aboard until I was ready to drop, my longing for Amelia was less poignant—I had no time to think about it then. But now, when the jewelled heavens were revelling and the very waters sighing as though dreaming of happiness, my soul was in a turmoil. I paced the deck

restlessly. Looking back upon my meetings with that girl was like moving down a sunlit path bestrewn with brilliant flowers, a path leading to life's paradise. And suddenly—that head thrown back for a kiss with another! My blood rose in a jet. If only I could tear the image of her who had made such cruel fun of me out of my heart, if only I could forget her very name! But I could not, and so I tried instead to tear the mask from her in my own eyes.

"She isn't worth the torture I am suffering for her sake. She is just a flighty girl, a heartless flirt, that's all! Today she carries on with one man, tomorrow with another. Who said she had emerald eyes? Cat's eyes, that's what they are! Ha, ha, ha.... My imagination made a beauty out of her. She shone merely in the beams of my own fancy, like the oily discharge of steamers in harbour, kindled into iridescence by the sun."

Only the presence of the other fellows kept me from laughing out loud in the bitterness of my heart. The thought sobered me.

The always dignified-looking Shellow strolled up and down on the other side of the vessel with his hands behind his back, Kimanodzi lay snoring on a coil of rope, and Jackson sat leaning against the mainmast, humming some Eastern tune, while next to him sat Jim. In the wheel-house, faintly lit up by a lantern, stood two helmsmen. When they spun the huge wheel, the steering chains that worked the rudder grated alongside the hull. The small figure of the mate paced the poop.

For a minute I was lost in contemplation of the two ridges of luminous foam streaming from the ship's bows like a shower of blue-green sparks as she cleaved the dark burnished surface of the sea.

The next minute I was thinking with remorse, "How could I think such beastly things of Amelia! She is a good girl, intelligent and beautiful, and above all, she's

sunny and gay as a lark in spring. What if she has written me to come and see her? It is me she has written to, not some other man. She simply wanted to compare me to that Englishman of hers. I didn't pass muster, that's all. . . ."

I tore myself away from this train of thought with an effort and began quickly to pace the deck.

Shellow struck the bells. The look-out man sat hunched forward like a graven image, right next to the bowsprit, staring out into the darkness. He got up, turned towards the poop, and shouted in a drawn-out voice, "A ship straight ahead!"

"Right-o," the mate answered from the bridge.

The hull of a ship, her green and red running lights burning like two coloured eyes, stood clearly outlined on our bow. She was a French cruiser. She pounded past, a fleeting vision seen only by a few watchmates, and was swallowed up in the darkness.

I went up to Jim and Jackson, and lowered myself on the deck beside them.

"Are you asleep, Jim?" I said.

"No," he answered, glancing at the starry sky.

"Fine night!"

"Yes, I love such nights. It's good to lie about and just let your mind run slack. Brings up your whole life. . . ."

That old seaman interested me.

"Are you married?" I asked him.

"Very much so!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I'm a much-married man with lots of families."

"Where are they?"

"All over the world—I have families on Ceylon, in Frisco, in South Africa, in Europe. I was young and strong once. The luck I had with women, damn it! They

took to me like barnacles to a ship's keel. Yes, I've spread my brood pretty freely over the face of the earth. If you was to get all my wives and children together in a bunch, they'd make quite a crowd, let me tell you."

He paused, then added, "And I have to end my days a lonely old man. . . ."

He uttered this somewhat sadly, then, as if ashamed of his momentary weakness, spat out a stream of curses.

I lay on the bare deck, gazing at the stars between the swelling sails. The tall masts swayed, creaking, as if pencilling invisible hieroglyphs across the gleaming sky.

In a certain spot upon the earth, amongst the dense wild forests of Russia, there was a small village, where, called to life by my parents, I had started my globe-trotting career by land and by sea.

I had met all kinds of women in my wanderings, but none had touched my heart, disturbed my soul, until I met one who had come into the world eight years after me in another land, upon a sea coast thousands of miles away. Why did I fall in love with Amelia of all women? Was love governed by any laws at all?

It was not for me to solve these questions.

A wisp of smoke curled from the galley chimney, where the cook was making coffee for the skipper. I could hear the splash and murmur of the sea, the song of the wind plucking at the rigging. The fragrant freshness of the sea fanned my body caressingly. I half closed my eyes, and it seemed to me that it was not the ship rocking on the waters, but the stars flitting about in the dark blue depths of the sky, shining seductively among the winged spars.

Fancy wove an enchanted tale of love, but the next moment I sprang to my feet and began restlessly pacing the deck, swearing with even greater fervour than Jim had done.

VII

Days and nights, sunrises and sunsets came and went in monotonous regularity.

Tomorrow we were to put in at Algiers. The helmsman had overheard a talk between the captain and his mate, and retailed the news to the crew at once.

The sailors were elated and began planning what they would do when they got ashore. Jim Harrison, despite the sunny morning and the balmy breeze that coquetted with the sea, was the only one the news did not gladden.

"What's up?" I said to him.

"My back aches like the devil," he said with an oath. "I feel all done up."

He went about his work listlessly, barely dragging his feet along, and the captain watched him from the poop with a fishy eye. Obviously he was displeased with the old man and did not think he was earning his salt. On his way to dinner he called him into his state-room.

Jim rejoined us several minutes later and, when we started questioning him, let loose a stream of invective, almost prayer-like in its steady droning fervour.

"May he never get out of this blasted sea, may the sharks tear him limb from limb, and may his stinking flesh give them all the belly-ache."

On he went, swearing long substantial curses that embraced the whole of the captain's career and that of all his descendants unto the twentieth generation, and included all his guardian angels. He stood before us ruffled and dishevelled, with waving arms and blazing eyes, shouting ribaldry in the most picturesque of terms, as if his youth and former daring had returned to him. One expected him at any moment to go back to the man who had wronged him and wipe the floor with him. But this outburst did not last long: having given vent to his long pent-up resentment, he wilted at once, and said in

a tone of senile resignation, "The skipper was right, though...."

"In what?" we asked.

"Says I'm played out. He's fired me. Given me a month's pay. Advises me to go and dry myself ashore."

"Yes, you were an eagle once, but you've worn your wings down," Shellow said. "I'm afraid you'll have to take the advice of Beelzebub's Brother."

"Not on your life!" Jim declared determinedly. "What, go back to that Sailors' Home again and peel potatoes, carry out the slops, scrub the floors and do all kinds of other crazy jobs without ever getting a whiff of the sea? No fear! No more Sailors' Home for me! You won't catch me pegging out in that blasted home after having followed the sea for fifty years!"

The old man left us and paced the deck for a long time with a brooding air. Sometimes he would stop and look around, as if admiring the wide blue spaces, especially the flaming horizon in the east, where the waters were dancing and smiling in the sunshine. Then, his mind apparently made up, he went below. He reappeared on deck an hour later with envelopes and note-paper in his hand, but he looked a changed man. His face was shaved, his hair brushed smooth, and he wore his best clothes. There was about him a peculiar air of solemnity. Sitting down on the deck with an improvised desk in the shape of a small board on his knees, he began to write a letter with a pencil, entirely ignoring those present. No one bothered him any more, and even the boatswain, in passing by, tried to steer clear of him.

In the evening, when we were off duty, Jim invited Jackson, Shellow and me to the table and treated us to whisky, a bottle of which he had bought from the cook.

"My sailing days are over," he said in a firm voice, filling our cups. "I'm a bit short of fifty years service afloat, but never mind...."

"You're a lucky man, Jim!" Shellow said with his usual air of gravity. "You've been round the sun over sixty times, and that's no joke for men in our position. I wonder whether we'll manage it?"

"Yes, I can't complain. It's been a good time while it lasted, dammit! If I could live my life over again, I'd choose a sailor's life without thinking twice about it."

We tossed off the whisky with water for a chaser.

"These are all my worldly goods," Jim said, laying out on the table his pay and the money he had obtained by selling his kit-bag with the junk it contained to the crew. "Round about four quids. Please post these letters for me," he continued, pointing to two sealed envelopes, "and remit this money in equal parts to Ceylon and Frisco. It's my last gift for the kiddies. It's all I have. The addresses are on the envelopes. . . ."

Jim was calm. Not a muscle moved on his deeply furrowed face, and his eyes were dry. We all guessed his intention, but no one spoke a word about it. There were several others of the crew in the forecastle besides us. Some lay sleeping in their bunks; the Japanese squatted on his heels, mending his shirt; the Hindu, sitting on the edge of the bunk, was playing on a jew's-harp; two at the lower end of the table were deeply engrossed in a game of cards. Jim, with a business-like air, stuffed a big ballast stone into an old sack, fastened shoulder-straps to it, and, slinging the heavy weight onto his back, tied it down with strong knots, as if he were going out on a long journey and taking a large supply of provisions with him.

"Hadn't you better think it over again, Jim?" I said, unable to contain myself any longer.

Shellow gave a vicious tug at my sleeve and glared at me. The old man looked away and threw out stubbornly, "I'm old enough to know what I'm doing."

Jim went round and shook everyone's hand, then climbed up the ladder. We followed him out on deck and stood round the hatch, watching him walk over to the ship's side with a firm tread, as cool and grave as ever. Not a word of complaint, not a single sigh. Looking round for the last time, he said, "Good luck, friends, and a fair wind. Good-bye. . . ."

"Good-bye, Jim!" we said as one man.

The sun sank seawards, and the whole smooth sheet of water was a colour gamut of orange tones.

Old Jim faced the poop and shouted loudly, "Captain!"

The latter came out of the wheel-house, but seeing that it was Jim, he turned away.

"Meet you soon in Davy Jones' locker!" the old man cried, and, jumping onto the gunwale, he plunged headlong into the water.

"He's a game one!" Jackson said, shaking his curly head, and hastened below, followed by the rest.

"That's the way a real sailor goes out!" Shellow murmured.

I lingered on the deck for a while, gazing sadly aft where only a moment ago a living soul had plunged into the dark chasm of the waters. I saw nothing but gambolling waves, gilded by the sunset. That gallant seaman Jim might never have existed.

VIII

We were two days out from Algiers, where nearly a third of the crew had chucked their berths and been replaced by new hands. For two days we had been having rough weather, and it was wearing us out.

The watch below deck, which had just been relieved, were sitting round the table, drinking absinth, eating tinned meat, and cursing the cook for not having prepared a hot meal. We were all fagged out after a long struggle

to get the topgallant and royal sails furled, but the liquor was already beginning to have its stimulating effect upon us.

"Brothers! Weather-beaten old tars!" one of the sailors cried with a snicker. "Aren't we told, 'Lay not up for yourself treasure upon earth'?"

"And be proletarians all your life, homeless as a sea-breeze," added Shellow.

Everyone laughed.

"Here's to the memory of poor old Jim," I proposed, lifting my cup of absinth.

"Hear, hear!" voices responded.

"Yes, he's worth it," Shellow said with an emotion I had never thought him capable of. "He was a devilishly plucky seaman. He slipped his cable and shoved off for kingdom come as cool as we step into a pub or a brothel. If I were the King of Heaven I'd forgive him all his sins for that alone and throw open the gates of paradise to him. But you can't expect the Lord to do that —he's blinded by his own glory, and doesn't see the beauty of the human spirit. Jim will get better treatment from Satan, I bet you any day!"

"You never said a truer word!" Jackson said, winking his left eye.

We drained our cups standing.

Shuddering in the tempestuous embrace of the elements, the *Neptune* creaked throughout her frame like a rheumatic invalid. Heavy seas struck her, and she rolled heavily from side to side; in the reeking air of the forecastle the human figures made queer jerky movements in an attempt to keep their balance and rescue mess-tins, forks and ship's biscuits that slid across the table. Through the mud-green glass of the portholes one had a hazy glimpse of the foaming sea, which leapt upwards from the skyline as though it intended to stand on end, then just as suddenly plunged downwards.

One man complained about the hard life a seaman had. His neighbour, a quiet unassuming Swede, who had signed on in Algiers, said reassuringly, "Every man bears his cross, and so do we."

"Are you sure of that?" Shellow demanded, turning to the Swede. "What if it isn't a cross a man is dragging on his back, but a rotten, good-for-nothing old log, and he is bound not for Golgotha but for the dust-hole? What would you say then?"

The Swede, taken aback, blinked his eyes.

"That tommy-rot is all right for chicken-hearted lubbers, not for real sailors," Shellow continued, his eyes scanning the faces round the table. "To hell with idol worship! Let's drink to the seaman, to all blue-water sailors, past, present, and future."

"Didn't I always say our ginger devil has a head that's not only meant to keep his ears apart!" Jackson crowed, ready to drink to anything so long as it was liquor.

Shellow slapped the Negro on the back and laughed out aloud for the first time. Something in his laugh reminded me of Amelia. I recollected that she had a brother who was sailing somewhere before the mast, and that on first meeting him on board the ship he had struck me as being familiar. I looked at him with quickened interest.

"You don't happen to have French blood in your veins, Mr. Shellow, do you?" I said, controlling my excitement.

He glanced at me in surprise.

"How do you know?"

"I guessed from the way you laughed. The other half of you is English, otherwise you wouldn't have that red hair."

"Well, I'll eat my hat! What else do you know?"

Just then one of the watch looked in and yelled at the top of his voice, "All hands ahoy!"

We tumbled up, grumbling and cursing, and stood huddled in the waist, waiting for further orders.

The blazing sunset shot out gigantic flames that wrapped themselves round the swollen sun like fiery-tinted brocade. The infuriated raging sea was all purple, dishevelled, covered with ridges raised by a boisterous wind. In the north, as if rising from some pitch-dark hell, hung a smoking mass of black clouds, curving round the vault of the sky in ponderous layers, widening, spreading and tumbling like an avalanche of mountains. It seemed as if all the world's evil spirits, rallied in countless legions, were coming down on us, volleying claps of thunder and flinging fiery crackling darts. Everything grew eerie and mysterious in the lurid semi-gloom.

Suddenly the wind let go. The sails hung slack. There was not a stir of air. The sea alone, disturbed and sombre, still ran high, its broad bosom heaving tumultuously. There was a tenseness in the hushed air, a sense of lurking hazard that quickened all my senses. As always in the face of danger, I felt a sudden sharpening of vision and became aware of the most trifling details.

Four helmsmen were struggling hard at the wheel in the wheel-house. The captain, on whose grim face I had never yet seen a smile, was on the bridge. Clad in oilskins and a sou'wester, which made him look like a pirate, his burly figure was half-turned towards the mate and the boatswain, to whom he was issuing orders. The mate was not of the stuff his skipper was made of; he passed on the latter's orders and kept glancing nervously northward whence a thick impenetrable murk rising from sea to black clouds was coming up fast. The boatswain looked from the captain to his mate as if he were deliberately showing off his ugly face. The cook went up on the bridge with the pot of hot coffee.

"We're going to get it rough," Shellow said, eyeing me with a look of new interest.

"Yes, looks like it," I answered.

Some of the sailors cursed themselves for not having stayed in Algiers. Jackson, in a soiled flannel shirt, dug his fingers into his curly hair, scowling and muttering something in his African dialect; his skin shone as if it had just been polished with blacking.

The boatswain tumbled from the bridge and came staggering down the pitching deck towards us.

"Take in the sails!" he roared. "Squall coming on! Turn to!"

Everyone rushed to his station. Jackson and I climbed the mainmast to take in the topsail.

Leaden masses of thunderclouds crept overhead, shutting out the blue sky, while the dazzling sunset still blazed with an immense flame, flooding the wilderness of sea with crimson light.

Lying out upon the yard on our bellies with feet braced against the foot-rope hanging under it, we set to work, straining every muscle. Our task was to haul the sail before it started to slat in the gale and banged itself to pieces. It was very difficult work, which demanded dexterity and daring, but as luck would have it, the brails by which the sail is hauled in had got wet with spray and were jammed in the blocks. We had to haul it in with our hands.

"Hurry up, Jackson!" I shouted at the top of my voice. "Just a bit more. . . ."

"Yes, just a bit!" the Negro answered, his body hunched into a black ball, as he caught the fluttering sail with deft trained hands.

"If the gale catches us up here, we'll get hell."

"You bet!" Jackson echoed, following it up as usual with a torrent of curses in all languages.

Wholly absorbed in my work, I had only time for an occasional glance about me, but in those fleeting

glimpses my mind took everything in with amazing clarity.

The wind had started blowing in fitful gusts, which freshened and constantly shifted round; the ship shuddered, tossed about on the waves; the livid brown murk came whirling down with a roar and boom. The sunset, now pushed up against the horizon by the black wrack of clouds, was like the wide-open fiery jaws of some fabulous monster.

The sail was already hauled in, and all we had to do was to lash it down, but the work grew ever more difficult. Blood was oozing from under my finger-nails.

Obviously we would not be able to manage it. All around was pandemonium. Frenzied whirlwinds from the grim north rushed out of the bleak night and whirled across the watery plain in a savage dance. The enraged sea roared, hissed and spluttered; mountainous, madly racing waves flung themselves upon the ship, which creaked and groaned under the furious impacts. Out of the black sky and the ragged stampeding clouds, angry thunderclaps fell unremittingly, followed by blinding zigzagging lightning. Our *Neptune* tossed about helpless and quivering, rolled from side to side, plunged headlong into the yawning troughs and reared in face of the swirling hills of water like a shying horse. Her ragged sails fluttering on the lower yard of her foremast, she rushed along at the mercy of the storm, answering only to the helm. Seas broke over the deck, tearing all kinds of gear from their lashings and sweeping them overboard. The face of a sailor, contorted with terror, appeared for a moment on the crest of a running wave, then disappeared in the foaming vortex. The ship's pitching and tossing was worse aloft. Deafened by the tumult, stunned by the awe-inspiring majesty of the mutinous elements, we clung to the yard for dear life.

I felt small and insignificant, like an insect clinging

to a thin reed. My eyes blinked rapidly, blinded with tears from the driving wind; the gusts swayed the mast, and the dizzy endless flight took my breath away.

"Jackson!" I yelled at the top of my voice. "Let's finish it!"

I saw that he was shouting, too, but we could not hear each other in the tumult of the gale.

"We're in a bad fix, Jackson," I found myself muttering as I fell to work again.

I gripped the bottom of the sail, figuring how best to slip the rope over it; I was sorry I had only two hands, with which I had to work and hold on at the same time.

Suddenly the vessel leapt forward with such a violent jerk that I was knocked off my precarious perch and went toppling down head foremost. Terror gripped my heart with an icy clutch. It flashed across me that if my head hit the deck my skull would be smashed to bits. Instinctively I made a movement to twist over onto my feet, like a cat. My fingers holding the end of the sail tightened their grip, and I hung helplessly in mid air, my swinging feet groping frantically for a foothold.

"Help! Help!" I shouted wildly, and, for some odd reason, in Russian. The gale answered me with a drunken roar.

For the moment, dazed by my fall and at the same time comforted by the thought that I could still hang on, I scarcely felt the weight of my body. The wind, as though resenting my impudence, pounded and buffeted me, and flung me about on all sides, bent on tearing me down, but the muscles of my arms were tensed like steel.

I looked down—there was not a soul on the streaming deck. Terror seized me anew at the thought that the deck was deserted while I was dangling at this dizzy height.

"Help!" I cried again, this time in English.

Dirty curtains fell, swaying, from the murky sky; forked lightning shot quivering darts, and wild tossing

wave crests, like outflung cloaks, surged upwards; the whole surface of the sea, as far as the eye could pierce the lurid gloom, was covered with surging hills, like so many volcanos rising out of the mysterious deeps and erupting lava. Our vessel was still being buffeted about. Dropping into a chasm scooped out by the gale, she would pause for a dismayed second before the dark-green walls of water that towered over her, threatening to crash upon her deck, then plunge on, topping the sheer crests as if thrown up by some unseen power.

Spinning in the air, clutching the sail, I caught a glimpse of a lone figure on the bridge. It was the captain, his head drawn into his shoulders, gripping the rail without stirring, as if spellbound by the fury of the storm. I might not have been there for all the notice he took of me.

My fear turned to fury.

"Help me, damn your bloody eyes!"

I gnashed my teeth furiously and felt a nauseous bitter taste in my mouth.

My muscles were growing tired, but I still dangled from that confounded swing. The wind was whirling, driving, sobbing, and howling in all keys, making sport of my body, which it swung away from the mast together with the sail and shook over the yawning chasms of the snarling sea. I felt like shrieking, shouting down the roar of the gale to stem the tide of fear in the face of death. Numb with terror, my lungs almost bursting with holding my breath, I hung on desperately with hooked steely fingers, and nothing short of hacking them off my body could have made me release my hold.

I saw clearly that there was no escape for me. I had to choose between crashing to a bloody death upon the deck, or drowning in the watery abyss.

I shut my eyes. The din was louder, more bewildering in the darkness, and when the ship lurched, I thought she was going to keel over. I looked up.

What was that? Ah, Jackson. He was lying flat on the yard with both arms locked round it, his curly head joggling. His thick lips were drawn back in his black face as if he were grinning, showing red gums and clenched white teeth. His right eye goggled at me insolently, and his left winked mockingly.

"You fat-head! Idiot!" I shouted, flying into a rage again. "Lower the rope! Blast your soul! I'll kill you!"

A flaming ball of lightning flew past us so close that I got a whiff of burning sulphur.

The Negro was still winking his left eye and grinning; his fat jowls quivered as if he were laughing at me. All of a sudden, at that awful moment, I vividly recalled how the Norwegian had smashed the bottle over Jackson's face on Madeira. "Do you hear me, Jackson? I'm sorry he didn't knock out that crazy eye of yours, and smashed the bottle instead of your thick skull!"

The sea spat foam at me, and the dashing sprays, as large as hailstones, struck my face painfully and blinded my eyes.

I thought that I was beginning to go out of my mind.

It was getting dark. The Negro's waggling head began to swell to an enormous, ridiculous size. It was no longer Jackson, but a sinister phantom hovering above an abyss of space and spiriting me away on its huge fluttering wing. My thoughts became confused and I lost all sense of time. In this wilderness of swirling waters and accursed swells that tossed us up and down, in this wild tumult and thunderous boom of the maddened gale, it was hard to imagine that somewhere there was firm land bathed in brilliant sunshine, clothed in luxuriant greenery and sweet-smelling flowers. The land had vanished like a beautiful dream, drowned in the troughs of the sea. Whether it was really the shades of night falling and deepening, or merely my bloodshot straining eyes that were failing me, I could not tell. There was no

longer sea or clouds around me—nothing but impenetrable darkness, stabbed by jets of flame; it seemed as if worlds were hurtling to destruction, giving off last flashes of life before returning to their state of primordial chaos. All was lost, swallowed up by death. In all the world I alone and that other one whose wing I was clinging to were still alive.

Suddenly, in my dimming mind, a fond image arose.

"Amelia!" I cried at the top of my voice, and slipped off the wing....

I came to the next day and could hardly believe that I was really lying in the crew's quarters. The ship was rocking gently on the swell.

Sunbeams peeped into the portholes and danced over the bulkheads. I was lying on the bunks, covered with a familiar old blanket, while next to me Jackson and Shellow sat talking.

I started up, but a sharp pain in my right side made me fall back with a groan.

"Oh, so you've woke up, pal," Jackson said, turning to me. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked as if he had not slept for a week. "That's fine. Good morning!"

I touched my head with stiff sore hands. It was swathed in blood-clotted bandages and felt heavy, as if weighted with quicksilver.

The Negro poured some liquid into a cup out of a squat bottle and gave it to me with a solicitous air.

"Wet your whistle with Marsala. Beelzebub's Brother sent it."

I drank the pleasant wine eagerly, while the Negro remarked, swearing, "A hell of a gale, that was! I thought it would be all over with us."

"Yes, it was a shindy all right," Shellow added.

"How's it I'm still alive?"

"You dropped on the shrouds, then rolled off onto the deck," said Jackson. "There was a flash of lightning just

at that moment. When I saw what had happened to you I tumbled down in a flash. Afraid you'd be swept overboard. But everything turned out all right, as you see."

The pain in my body, specially in the right side, was so sharp that I could not turn over.

"I'm afraid I've got some broken ribs."

"Never mind, they'll patch you up in hospital," Shellow said imperturbably.

"Did we lose many hands?"

"No, only two chaps went to feed the fishes."

Jackson plied me with Marsala, muttering his regret about its being a lady's drink, and not his bottled earthquake, a glass or two of which, he said, would have done me a world of good. Presently I became delirious. Visions of Amelia thronged confusedly in my brain with a host of other images. I shouted something, struggled painfully to unravel some torturing riddle.

When I came to myself I saw the same two seamen sitting at my bunk.

"I say, aren't you some relation of mine?" Shellow asked during one of my lucid spells, bending over me.

"No, Bill Brown, I'm no relation of yours. I'm on the rocks, Bill Brown. . . ."

He stared at me with puzzled eyes.

Afterwards I hazily remember being carried over into a boat; Jackson wrung my hand, gazing at me moist-eyed, and urged me in vigorous terms to fight for my life like the devil; then, in a boatload of strange men I was rowed to a steamer that lay belching smoke into a clear sky.

IX

I felt myself sinking. A yellow-green mist blotted out the world. Faint sounds reached my ears. I could hardly breathe, and my heart seemed to have stopped beating. The lower I sank the thicker grew the darkness around

me. I felt, with a sense of wonder, as if I were lying flat on my back in water, slowly sinking. The next moment I was lying at the bottom of a deep oozy river, and could not make out why I was still alive. There was a dull ache in my right side, as if my ribs were slowly being clamped in a vice. Crushed beneath the mass of water, I could hardly breathe, and could not stir a muscle. There was a sickening smell in my nostrils, and confused thoughts stirred sluggishly in my befuddled head. What was that noise above me? It sounded like steamboats passing down the river over my head. I was suffocating for want of air. Was I dead or not? Then came a gap in my consciousness, darkness....

The mist around me began to thin and disperse, as if day were breaking, but I could still see nothing. Carefully and gently, without a single jerk, I was raised from some fathomless abyss as if in a smoothly running lift. This continued for what seemed ages. I felt life returning to me, pouring back into my body through all its pores. I breathed easier. But what had become of the river and the loathsome toads? High up in front of me I fancied I saw a white dot, no bigger than a pin's head. It sank lower and lower, widening out and growing more distinct until at last it assumed the square shape of a ceiling. Simultaneously I heard a far-off humming sound. It gradually drew nearer and resolved itself into a murmur of voices. I turned my head and looked round: I was in a large, shining white hall; glass cupboards with gleaming metallic instruments lined the walls; porcelain wash-bowls with nickel-plated taps; next to the table on which I lay stood a group of men and women in snow-white hospital gowns, looking down at me and speaking in a language that I could not understand.

Marvellously brilliant sunbeams poured in through the large window and fell upon the floor. The hot sky

was a dazzling turquoise. For quite a time I could not make out where I was and what had happened to the lift that had raised me out of the abyss. The rush of joy took my breath away, and my only fear was of sinking back again into that dark chasm. At last it struck me that I had been operated on.

"Did you make a good job of it?" I asked, smiling.

A middle-aged gentleman with a pointed little beard in a swarthy face—evidently the head surgeon—told me cheerfully in halting English that the operation had gone off well, and that my two broken ribs and injured head would heal quickly.

"In a month you'll be fit for sea again."

"No more sea for me, doctor."

"Why not?"

"I'm sick of it—the way one gets sick of a false wanton woman."

The doctor laughingly said something to the others in Italian, and they all smiled. I took a liking to that jovial man; somehow he kept my spirits wonderfully tuned to a major key.

On his orders I was carefully transferred to a stretcher and conveyed to one of the numerous wards.

The eyes of the patients were trained upon me from several beds.

The sickly smell of chloroform still clung to me. My head was full of noises, and I had a dull pain in my side. The nurse, a black-eyed Italian girl, tucked me away in my bed and left me after some admonition or other.

I was overwhelmed with joy at the thought that I was still alive and on firm ground. I looked through the open windows whence was wafted up the heart-warming breath of joyous spring. The trees spread the tender green of their foliage under a vivid sky, and the glowing flowers were drunk with the rich sunshine.

On the right a town lay spread upon the hill-side—ancient castles blackened with age, the open arches of belfries, the white blocks of new houses, villas with marble columns and beautiful spires above them. Higher up the hill-side the buildings were sparser, hidden among shady plane-trees and fig-trees, cloaked in the curly greenery of clinging ivy. On the left, losing themselves in the clear infinity, loomed the airy ridges of the mountains. Raising myself carefully on my hands I caught a glimpse of smooth sea, a sparkling patch of smiling azure; but I had no desire to look at it; I turned away as from a treacherous foe who was bent on strangling me, and recollected with a shudder the horror of my recent experiences over the abyss.

No, enough of the sea for me! How many times my life hung by a thread! Nothing in the world will make me go to sea again!

Several thick, short palm-trees stood in front of the windows, languishing in the heat; they reminded me of fat dumpy merchants' wives, and their well-fed smugness drew from me a smile of amusement. Next to them towered an ungainly cactus, bristling with sharp needles, its red flowers giving off a pungent odour, its green fleshy hands fearlessly exposed to the blazing sun; it looked so hard and self-reliant that one felt like taking after it in life. I could not tear my eyes away from the land, as if I had never before noticed all the magic of its spring tide, as if the lovely poem of its creative power were being unfolded to me for the first time.

I felt the strength coursing back into my body. My mind cleared, and an immense elation grew within me. My heart was brimming with the joy of life, like a crystal goblet with sparkling wine.

X

I was back again in the town where Amelia lived. I had only come to take my things and go away never to return to these parts again.

"Good heavens, Mr. Anton, what's the matter with you?" my landlady asked in astonishment, when the greetings were over.

"Nothing."

"You look ten years older."

"Shouldn't be surprised. I've been ill."

But when she learned that I was going away to look for a job, she protested in a tone of friendly concern:

"I simply won't hear of it! No, no! Fancy going away in such a condition! What you need is good food and a rest. Your room isn't let, by the way. I'll put you on your feet in no time."

Always firm in my resolve, I had nevertheless let myself be persuaded this time by her arguments and decided to stay on for a couple of days. But I was already living here over a week, and kept telling myself that I still had some money to go on with. When I walked through the busy streets I always steered clear of Amelia's house to avoid meeting her. I felt drawn out of town, where I would go on a lonely ramble, enjoying the rich carnival of Nature. Sometimes, leaving the house at rosy dawn, I would arrive at my favourite wood with the rising sun. Dew-drops, like tears of delight, sparkled on the emerald-green velvet of the grass and on the trees, which were clad in a bridal garb of young leaves. The sky rang with the trilling song of the lark and other birds. My heart swelled with wonder as I stood leaning against a tree on the edge of the wood, bathed in sunshine and drinking in the splendour of late spring. A partridge would scurry through the grass with outstretched neck, or a grey rabbit would dart out of a bush,

sit down on its haunches, its ears twitching, and stare at me with silly goggling eyes before it scampered off again—sorry game for the sport of the local landlords Near by stretched a field, green with young sprouting wheat and hedged off into plots. Farm-houses lay scattered about the countryside.

I was haunted by a sense of having lost something, something I had to find at all cost. Although naturally of a cheerful disposition, I felt an odd disturbing sense of heartache, which trickled into my breast like water into a leaky hold. I began to weary of the solid earth and felt ever more strongly drawn towards the sea.

The weather was hot, and there was not a breath of wind. The splashing waves rolled lazily over the shallows, chasing the children, who frisked about the beach raising a merry hubbub, while farther out, like a huge bath of molten sunshine, lay the smooth gleaming waste of water unmarred by the slightest ripple. Here and there the blue enamel of its gold-spangled surface was crushed by the cleaving bows of outward-bound ships. I would stare hungrily at one of them until she had disappeared below the horizon. Tired out by the heat, I started to bathe, swimming about on the very spot where, a year ago, I had met Amelia. The thick salt water made floating easy, and I lay upon it flat on my back, as upon a soft bed, all my limbs relaxed and motionless. It was pleasant to gaze with half-closed eyes into the unfathomed deeps of the sky, from which poured hot floods of caressing light. At one such moment I suddenly became aware of a familiar crimson kerchief bobbing in the water close by, and the next moment I heard a joyful exclamation, "Why, if it isn't Mr. Anton! My dear friend!"

"It's me all right, Miss Brown," I answered, standing up in the water.

"I am so glad to see you!"

I kissed her hand. Amelia blushed, her face warmly pink as if bathed in the afterglow of sunset, and again I felt how near and dear to me she was.

"You have changed so," she said.

"I daresay I have."

"I know all about you ... how you hung on the sail and fell from the mast, and how they afterwards sent you to Italy by another steamer."

"Your brother told you?"

"Yes. If you only knew how I cried when I heard of your misfortune!"

We kept afloat within a pace of each other without shifting our positions. I realized now beyond a shadow of doubt that I had merely been deceiving myself up till now in avoiding Amelia. I had been seeking her, if anything, and now that I had found her I felt like proclaiming my new-found joy to the wide sea with a shout of joy.

"And how do you feel now?"

"Thanks, much better."

While speaking to her I searched her face. She was still the same sweet girl with the same gay rippling laugh and the same dancing exciting eyes, yet there was some indefinable change in her expression, as if life had taught her something she had not known before.

The impression put me out, somehow.

"And how are you getting on, Miss Brown?"

"Call me just Amelia. I am now—"

She broke off at the sight of my startled glance and dropped her eyes.

"Since when?"

"About a month ago."

A sharp pang went through my heart, as if a scorpion had sunk its sting into it, and the blood began to hammer in my temples.

"I wish you every joy, miss. I wish ... er ... goodbye."

I had started in a loud mocking tone, but could not keep it up. The words died on my lips, and turning sharply, I swam away from her. I could hear her calling me:

"Where are you going? Mr. Anton! Wait a minute! Oh please, I beg you! I want to tell you something...."

I struck out blindly for the beach, a numb feeling at my heart. The shore rocked before my eyes, the buildings reeled and the very sea seemed to have turned over.

XI

I was quite well again, and might never have had broken ribs, but with returning health I wearied all the more of dry land. I wandered about over it for days on end, not knowing what to do with myself, feeling lonely and miserable. My legs being accustomed to balancing on an unsteady deck I even felt a certain awkwardness in treading on firm ground. My muscles ached for something to do. This whole world, built over with multi-storeyed houses and factories, churches and pubs, seemed narrow and cramped to me. And so I spent most of my time by the sea, gazing at its sunny dimpled distances, and it reflected so beautifully the moods of the changing day that I forgot the horrors I had experienced upon it, and felt drawn towards it again irresistibly. During my visits to the harbour I gazed with envy at loading ships making ready for sea, or at the seamen off newly-arrived vessels going down town in a band, all sunburnt, weatherbeaten and uproariously jolly. Sometimes I ran into acquaintances, who told me where they had been, what kind of passage they had had, and what berths were open on good ships, and their stories made me feel worse than ever.

One day I came to the harbour early in the morning. The air was calm. All round was an impenetrable fog. I

trod gingerly over the stony shore, as if stepping into turbid water, feeling my way with the instinct of familiarity. The invisible sun was aided by the yellow smudges of the street lamps. The thick fog, like brownish smoke, swayed and shifted, thickening in one place and thinning in another, blotting out the sea, the sky, and the town. Looking at that reeking fog-bank, which crept over the earth and the harbour like a noiseless ghost, I had a feeling all the time that something was going to happen. The thick fog did not interfere with the work. The harbour was as tensely alive as ever, full of dim vague movements and diverse sounds. The blurry outlines of engines, carts, men, and ships would loom for a moment out of the muddy flowing waves of air only to disappear again in the throng of swaying ghosts. Ships' bells rang incessantly, awakening the startled echoes of the harbour with their brassy booming notes. Sirens shrieked hysterically on all sides, now advancing, now retreating like the sinister cries of winged monsters hovering in the impenetrable air. I walked through a ghostly mysterious world, wrapped in swirling waves of murk.

By ten o'clock not a trace of the fog remained. It was brought home to me as I walked down the beach that day, that life ashore was not for me. The sea beckoned, beckoned me with the overpowering lure of its sweeping spaces, its freedom, its perfumes, the cry of the gulls, and the thrilling whistle of outward-bound steamers. And although I knew that out there, beyond that crystal horizon, beyond the undulating wilderness, beyond the edge of that blue canopy spread over as blue and immense a plain of water, I would meet similar shores with similar buildings peopled with kindly souls, I nevertheless felt irresistibly drawn towards them.

I found renewed pleasure in poring over nautical books, and would go far out of town for that purpose,

choosing a favourite spot on the sand between two boulders right near the sea.

One evening I was so deeply lost in contemplation of the sunset, which wrapped the whole watery plain in a rosy mist, that I did not become aware of Amelia's approach until she spoke to me.

"I knew I should find you here," she said, with a gay laugh, giving me her hand.

"Why?" I asked scrambling to my feet.

"I saw you this afternoon, going down the beach in this direction."

Her eyes shone softly like twin green stars, and I could not help smiling.

"I've been looking for you quite a time. I wanted to ask you about my brother. How is he getting on, where is he, when does he think of coming home?"

Amelia seated herself daintily on one of the boulders after blowing off the dust so as not to soil her dark-blue skirt, and I lowered myself at her feet on the sand. A flimsy white blouse and white straw hat prettily set off her face, which was covered with a healthy tan. Red roses were pinned at her breast. I answered all her questions and gave her a full account of our hard life aboard the *Neptune*, omitting not a single detail.

"Isn't it just awful, what you have to put up with!" Amelia exclaimed from time to time. The sad expression of her face awoke in me kindly feelings towards her. "My poor brother!"

The sunset faded and the sea lost its colours; the stars peeped out shyly in the sky.

Amelia unpinned the roses at her breast and choosing the best one handed it to me, saying, "My heart goes with it."

"A heart as lovely as this flower," I said, receiving the gift.

She smiled at me warmingly.

"Judging from Bill's letter I thought you were dead."

"It takes more than that to kill me."

"I'm so glad for you."

She toyed with the remaining roses in silence, then said, "If only Bill's letter had come three days earlier. . . ."

"What then?" I asked.

"My life might have taken a different turn. . . ."

The hidden meaning of her last words set my pulse tingling. My courage and self-confidence came flowing back to me.

It was quiet and deserted all round. Out at sea the lights of fishing-boats went on, and the lighthouse flashed a welcome and the promise of a near landfall to homecoming seamen.

The town throbbed with twinkling lights, which threw a soft radiance into the sky. Amelia's spirits rose, and her low throaty voice became vibrant. She told me about the theatre and her girl friend, laughing with a silvery rippling sound that harmonized delightfully with the low splash of the waves.

"My brother is sure I married you. He thinks a lot of you. It's a pity I haven't got his letter with me—he writes quite a story about you. By the way, he says that when you were unconscious you uttered my name and called me darling. Is that true?"

I felt like shouting that it was all perfectly true, that she was still the dream-girl of my heart, but I was ashamed to confess it, and, besides, I somewhat resented the question.

"Maybe. . . . I don't remember. . ." I answered with affected coldness.

"How serious you are! I'd like us to remain friends. Do you understand? Lifelong friends. . . ."

"Why should we be enemies? We have nothing to quarrel over, we know exactly where we stand."

"What a horrid temper you have!"

Her face clouded, and she plucked the rose petals and threw them into the running surf.

A brilliant glow suffused the pale sky, and a minute or two later a full moon rode out, extinguishing the smaller stars and reaching out to us a broad luminous lane stippled as it were with silvery flakes. The air became blue and the distant buildings of the town and the winding coastline took on sharper outlines.

We stood for a long time in utter silence, gazing at the smooth luminous plain of the sea.

"Well, are you happy?" I asked, breaking the oppressive silence.

"Oh yes!" Amelia answered quickly, darting at me an annoyed glance. "My husband adores me. He'd do anything for me, even commit a crime which might cost him his life. . . ."

"Does he mean as much to you too?"

"Naturally, it's give and take. He's such a lovable man! Courageous, straightforward, and handsome! The hours that keep him away from home are a misery to me."

Amelia lifted her arms and patted her fluffy hair, which looked extremely attractive in the moonlight.

"We'd better be going, it's getting late," I said bleakly, with a feeling of envy towards my happy rival.

"Yes, let's go," Amelia said with a note of disappointment in her voice.

But we sat on the beach without stirring.

"Some of the men I knew were very nice," she went on, "but they all look so insignificant to me now in comparison with my husband."

Saying this, she flung the stalks of the plucked roses down in the sand with an angry gesture. An oncoming wave pounced on them and drowned them in pearly foam.

It struck me that she was mocking me, making fun of my love and sufferings. I got up and went over to her.

"Do you mean to say all men are nobodies compared with your husband?" I demanded.

She got up, too, squared her shoulders, looked me straight in the eye from under frowning brows, which now resembled the spread wings of a sea-gull, and said defiantly:

"Yes, all of them! And I despise them now!"

I gripped her arms, so furious that I could have hurled her into the sea.

"Me too?"

"Let me go! You're hurting me!" she cried, struggling in my grip.

"Answer me!"

"Anton! Darling, how strong you are!"

She threw her head back, veiling her eyes with her eyelashes, as though she were ashamed of the moonlight.

I put my arm round her waist and drew her to me, peering into her face. I could feel her breath, the quiver of her palpitant body.

Under the light of the riding moon the outspread sea lay slumbering in deep repose, shedding a lustre of its own, as if seeing beautiful dreams. Dawn dabbed a roseate streak upon the edge of the sky. The air was fresh and exhilarating. Not a sound broke the solemn stillness of the beach along which Amelia and I were returning to town save the foamy surf, looking like whipped cream, which rolled up the beach, purring its incessant melody, like a stroked cat.

I felt a deep lassitude in my body, but my heart was light and happy. Dim feelings made music in my soul, and hazy elusive thoughts flitted around me like fireflies in a hot tropical night.

"Don't come any farther," Amelia said, stopping on the outskirts of the town.

"All right," I said, gazing at her tenderly. Her smiling face looked tired but happy.

At parting she flung her arms round my neck and whispered:

"If you knew how I hate to go back to my husband! I can't stand him. Darling! Why didn't you sweep me off my feet that time like you did now? Why did you have to start telling me about that prison? Things might have turned out differently. You and I are made for each other.... But of that another time.... I'll see you tomorrow at the same place. Wait for me."

Bathed in the glow of rising dawn, she went away with a sort of stealthy tread, her heels cautiously tapping on the stone pavement, her shoulders slightly stooped as though borne down by the weight of a sinful conscience, while I stood following her with my eyes until she turned the corner.

I did not feel like going to bed. I went back to the sea-shore and wandered down the winding strip of shingle, wandered aimlessly, thinking of nothing, listening only to the soft music of the waves. The last lingering stars went out, the paling moon died, while the east steadily brightened, pierced with javelins of purple and gold. The sea cast off the mantle of night in a burst of sunshine; vivid splashes of colour, weaving themselves into fanciful patterns, stippled the smooth surface; the blue of the widening sky grew more intense; the flaming horizon was flung back. My heart swelled and expanded with it, serene and buoyant, as if refreshed by a golden rain, and became one with the immensity of space that lay steeped in the brilliance of the new-born sun.

It was the sea beckoning....

Quickly, as though afraid I would be late, I walked off to the Sailors' Home to sign on.

1919

THE VOYAGE OF THE «COMMUNIST»

THE *Communist*, formerly the *Mikhail Lund*, of the State Baltic Steamship Line, has been lying in dock in the port of Sunderland for a week. And for a week the red flag had been flying at her mast. At last everything was ready. Her holds loaded up with coal, her newly acquired anchor raised, and all shore formalities completed, she stood with steam up, ready to get under way. We had two seas to cross—the North and the Baltic—to deliver our cargo at Riga.

On the morning of November the fourteenth English tugboats towed our steamer out of the harbour. And when they cast off, the ship's telegraph on the bridge clanged and the hand moved to half speed. With a parting hoot, our ship took leave of the rock-bound coast of Scotland. Then, laying a course 62° SW less 17° for general correction, she forged ahead at full speed. There was a pretty fresh breeze, but the ship had it astern, and this only gave her more speed.

Sailors hung around the galley, laughing and joking.

"With a fair wind we'll be in the Kiel in no time," one of them remarked.

"In two days we'll be drinking German beer," said another.

At this the cook, a dour-faced German, who always wore an air of intense gravity, as if he were for ever grappling with the problem of perpetual motion, shook his head.

"That's just guess-work. No good."

"Why?"

"Because this is the North Sea. The devil's kitchen for ugly weather. You can take that from me."

The cook fell silent and stirred the soup in a big saucepan.

The boatswain, in enormous top-boots that looked heavier than their owner, walked about the upper deck with the other hands, seeing to the lashings. The carpenter, a broad-shouldered man with a bristly moustache, lowered a foot gauge down the gauge pipes and took the depth of the bilge-water. This done, he went up on the bridge and reported to the officer of the watch, "Water in the holds—five to seven inches."

"Very good."

The blue of the sky became overcast. The *Communist* ran steadily before the sea with a buoyant lift.

The revolving log clicked off the miles with eager haste.

Early the next morning the wind eased. The sky cleared, and the sun shone out autumnally cold.

The off-duty watch huddled in the engine casing next to the funnel. It was warm in there. I had often sat there, listening to their yarns. Just now they were talking about the recent past, when the winds of the revolution flung men from one war front to another—from the Baltic to the shores of the White Sea, from the cold plains of Siberia to the dizzy heights of the torrid Caucasus.

"Yes, those were hot times," one of the men wound up.

"It seemed as if it would never end," said another.

Then off they went at a tangent.

"I wonder what our wives are doing now in Petersburg," an elderly seaman said with a sigh.

A young stoker who played the mandolin tossed his curly head with a gay laugh.

"I'm a lucky fellow—no wife to worry about, no tart to tie me down. . . ."

The boatswain had thoughts of his own. He was pleased the steamer was going to Riga. He had a mother there whom he had not seen for fourteen years.

"Do you mean to say you haven't been home all that time?" I asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"Sailing about all the time. I've been following the sea from a boy."

The navigating officers strolled up and down the bridge in turn, pleased at the fine weather. Now and then a whistle sounded up there and a voice said:

"Watchman!"

"Yes, sir!"

"How's the log?"

The sailor would run aft, glance at the log dial and come back to the bridge, reporting, "Eighty-two and a half."

The navigating officer would open the log-book and make a note of it.

In the afternoon the weather quickly began to break. The breeze freshened, began whining in the ventilators and whistling through the rigging. Clouds crowded up from below the horizon and scudded low across the darkling sky. The old seamen looked grave.

"Afraid we're in for it," one said.

"It's not so bad," others said reassuringly. "We've seen dirtier weather than this."

Rising steadily, the gale burst towards evening. Night, drearily long and brooding, began to close in. The North Sea worked itself up into a sullen fury. Our steamer began to dip her bow, as if begging mercy of the wild elements. But everything around breathed implacable cruelty. The sea ran high, whipped into a seething foam. Grey-crested waves swarmed up the ship's sides and over her deck, feeling and tugging at every part as if testing whether it was properly secured.

I went up on the bridge. The captain was not there; he had been taken ill and was in his cabin. The navigating officers were running the ship.

"Well, how goes it?" I asked them.

"Pretty bad, as you see."

Judging by their terse commands to the sailors we were in for something serious. The mercury was falling. The gale gathered force. I peered hard into the many-voiced tumult of the dark.

Looking at the tossing, foaming sea it seemed as if invisible hands were shaking and waving white streamers. The whole watery plain, wrapped in intense darkness, was in violent motion. Everything around was racing madly onwards amid a terrific din and a savage singing. Heavy seas struck the ship.

One of the navigating officers, a tall powerful man, said, "We've been caught in the wing of a cyclone. That's definite."

The second, a dark-haired self-possessed Ukrainian, did not dispute the statement and merely said, "We have only another hundred odd miles to go to the Kiel Canal."

The thing was to get out of the cyclone, and still more important, to avoid its formidable centre: there a stifling calm reigned in the air and the storm looked down with the blue eye of heaven, but there the waves surged up-

wards from the chasms of the deep with such overwhelming fury that they were capable of wrecking the stoutest ship.

"We ought to have put out from Sunderland a day earlier," remarked the second navigating officer.

"Yes, we could have hopped the North Sea without mishap then," the first one said.

They fell silent, each a prey to disturbing thoughts.

The furious onset began. The enraged sea broke over the deck, reaching the bridge and rushing into the crew's quarters. The upper deck was completely flooded. Parts of the ship were wrecked. The iron log-reel with a steel cable that looked like a huge spool was torn loose by the seas. It bumped and slithered over the deck and dashed itself against the bulwark. The accommodation-ladder broke in two.

The sick captain came into the chartroom, glanced at the chart of the North Sea, and lay down on the sofa without saying a word.

To avoid the low-pressure area it was decided to alter the ship's course.

"South-west thirty-five!" the command was given.

"Thirty-five, sir!" answered the man at the wheel.

The *Communist* swung round slowly and teetered into the eye of the wind, head on to the raging sea. She seemed to have flown into a rage herself, maddened by the harassing enemy, and flung herself headlong into the mountainous boiling seas. It was an act of despair.

We had to fix our position. The fix could only be worked up by taking depth soundings, as no lighthouse was visible. Around us was nothing but warring darkness.

"Leadsmen in the chains!" came the order from the bridge.

But the malevolent ingenuity of the sea knew no bounds: the mechanical depth gauge stayed overboard for good.

The boatswain, a man of few words, spat savagely and climbed to the bridge, followed by a group of sailors.

After a short tussle with the wind, which was bent on tearing the door out of my hands, I stumbled into the chartroom. Just then the *Communist* listed heavily to port, and I was flung against the opposite bulkhead, striking the bunk painfully. It was light in here. The chief navigating officer, gripping the edge of the table, stood smoking his pipe and staring gloomily at the sea chart spread out on it. Meeting my interrogative glance, he said, "Bad fix, damn it. Got to think of some way of giving this cyclone the slip. That's definite."

"But how?"

Before he could answer, the anxious voice of the dark-haired Ukrainian burst through the open door:

"Boat Three broken loose!"

"Clear the lower deck!" commanded the chief navigating officer, rushing out of the chartroom.

Half a length of the ship's boat had been torn out of its chocks and was banging against the superstructure. The men were trying to lash it down. They worked in the dark, clinging for support to whatever they could, drenched from head to foot with cold water. After a tremendous effort they got the boat lashed down. This done, they went to secure other parts of the ship. While they were doing this a hundred-ton sea struck the boat with smashing force and sent it crashing overboard.

The navigating officers glanced anxiously at the barometer. It kept dropping until the hand on the dial pointed to the menacing figure of 756 millimetres.

It was reported up to the bridge: "Log torn loose!"

By and by another calamity was reported: "Water in the forepeak and crew's quarters."

This last piece of news was alarming. As every seaman knows, the forepeak, situated in the angle of the ship's bows, is a fairly large compartment, in which the extra tarpaulins, ropes, rigging and other ship's articles are kept. What is more, this hold, beginning from the keel, communicates with the passage of the crew's quarters by means of a hatch and this made things worse, for it gave the water more space.

The navigating officers exchanged hasty remarks.

"She's been down by the bow for some time, I've noticed."

"Yes, she's dipping too much."

There was only one way of fighting the treachery of the water, which had broken into the forepeak and the crew's quarters, and that was by putting the hand pump into service.

"What about rigging the fire-pump?"

"Impossible. The men will be swept overboard."

"But what else can you do?"

The navigating officers frowned.

The tragedy that had been enacted upon that treacherous sea was only too painfully fresh in their memory. It had happened only two months ago. There had been a similar hurricane and precipitous sea. And when the fury of the storm was spent, Lloyd's men in a large grey building in London had struck six vessels off the world's register: they had gone down with all hands, drawn into the insatiate belly of the North Sea.

A tall sailor stood at the wheel, peering at the compass-card in the binnacle, and steering hard to keep the ship on her set course. Suddenly his startled voice rang out, "The rudder is jammed!"

He repeated it in a louder voice. For the moment everyone was stunned. Then the helm was checked and found

to be really starboarded and out of gear. Shuddering from the impacts of the sea, the *Communist* began to spin round as if dazed by the rain of savage blows. The engines were stopped. The roll had increased to forty-five degrees. The ship was a helpless captive at the mercy of an infuriated sea. Every minute lost spelt death. The chief navigating officer rapped out orders in quick succession.

"Send the engineer to the steering engine!"

"Examine the steering chain," he said, turning to another sailor.

Some storm-tossed vessel was approaching on our bow. We had to pass clear of each other.

The W.T.-man was sent for.

"Tell them our ship is not under command."

To which the W.T.-man, a rather phlegmatic fellow, who kept his head under all circumstances, answered tersely, "The aerial has broken down. One of the generators is flooded. The set isn't working."

A red lantern was brought. With difficulty one of the men lit it, then fell head over heels the moment he stepped out of the chartroom with it. There came a tinkle of shattered glass.

The steering engine was housed in a special compartment under the bridge. All three engineers and the engineman, who was considered a skilful mechanic, were already busy there. It was dark in there, and they worked by the light of torches. Water had penetrated the portholes and the openings through which the steering chain passed, rising at times knee-high. The ship shuddered, and lurched, and rolled from side to side. It required amazing dexterity and strength of will to overhaul the engine under such conditions. Each stroke of the sledge-hammer awakened an echoing tremor of hope in men's hearts.

Meanwhile the *Communist* was paralyzed. The navigating officers cudgelled their brains for ways of saving the ship. They thought of manning the hand gear, located

aft, but with the ship scooping hundreds of tons of water over the deck at every plunge that was out of the question. Meanwhile we were drifting at the mercy of the waves. It was decided to fall back on the last expedient—to let go the anchor. But that was no easy task either. Besides, it was doubtful whether the ship would be able to ride out such a gale and heavy seas. The sounding-lead was found after a long search, and the depth taken with no little difficulty. Meanwhile the *Communist*'s horn began to sound the alarm. The night was pitch-dark, stabbed by flashes of lightning, the invisible wings of the wind whistled, the sea boomed, and into this hellish symphony burst the hoarse frantic screams of the perishing ship.

A rocket was fired. It went off with a crash, dazzling the men.

But who could help us at such a time, when the deepest caverns of the sea had turned upside down?

The sledge-hammer thudded in the hands of the engineers, who were trying to put life back into the derelict ship.

How long that awful suspense lasted, during which we trembled on the brink, it was impossible to say.

At last a yell came from the wheel-house, "The helm's working!"

Once more the steel muscles of the engines sprang to life: once more the *Communist* threshed upon her course, running for the land.

After the first flush of joy it was borne in upon us all too soon that we had received but a momentary respite. The slogging onset of the sea, slowly dealing destruction to the vessel, did not cease for a moment. The bower anchor at the foremast broke from its lashings. It prowled about the deck like a traitor, aiding the gale in its destructive work. Its iron bulk rolled and crashed about as if some fiendish being had run amock, and was ripping and tearing up the ship with iron bars.

The night passed like a horrible dream. Bleak dawn brought little comfort. The weather did not improve.

In all the crew's and officers' quarters the water splashed about with a dismal sound. The only place where the men could take refuge was the engine room. Here, on the portside level with the cylinders, was a small storeroom in which all kinds of tools and spare parts for the engine were kept. It had now been turned into a shelter for the crew. Everyone off duty—helmsmen, engineers, stokers and navigating officers—crawled into that dirty hole. Men sat and sprawled about, their huddled bodies lit up by the dim flame of an oil lamp. Some of the men, exhausted by hard work, quickly fell asleep, only to be awakened the next minute and called up for some new job.

"How are things up there?" was the invariable question put to every sailor as he came below with chattering teeth, shivering with the cold.

"It's hell afloat!"

"Isn't the weather clearing?"

The chief engineer, a stout middle-aged man, remarked, "During my thirty years at sea I've been in many a fix as nasty as this."

From the corner came on a familiar voice.

"Once we got caught in a typhoon out in the Sea of Japan. Pretty rough time it was. Had passengers on board. One of them came out of his cabin and wanted to get up on the bridge. Just then a sea broke over the deck. He should have made a dash from it, or caught hold of something. But he just stood there gaping, like a duck in a thunderstorm."

"And what happened?" someone asked impatiently.

"Swept right off the deck. Like a fly licked off by a bull's tongue."

"Didn't you save him?"

"Some hopes, in a storm like that."

The men fell silent, listening to the smashing blows of the sea. The ship reared, then plunged and lurched as though she was about to turn turtle. The men were thrown together in a heap. They caught their breath, and their eyes filled with anguish. A pink-faced Estonian, who had managed to keep his spirits up so far, said with a touch of sadness, "Poor Mother! She doesn't know what a time her son is having. . . ."

The chief engineman, who was also the crew's social organizer, tried to cheer the men up.

"Don't worry, comrades," he said. "Our *Communist* will weather this storm all right."

"Her hull is none too—" another began and broke off abruptly, his eyes tragically dilating.

A sea rolled through the skylight and came crashing down into the engine room. On coming into contact with the hot cylinders the water hissed and formed a cloud of vapour. We craned our necks towards the open doors, waiting in an expectancy of fear for something worse to happen. But the engines, with a quick sigh, went on working. The sound was reassuring.

Someone complained in the semi-dark, "When we have a drink ashore people blame us for it. But no one knows what a hell of a time we have at sea."

The dynamo was flooded and useless, and the ship was left without electric light. The emergency lamps could not be lighted, as the glass burst from the wet spray. Only oil wicks were burning. In the engine room all the work went on in the semi-dark.

The engineman climbed the grating with the agility of an acrobat, feeling the engine to see whether the working parts were overheating, and giving them a thorough oiling. The engineer meanwhile stood on the lower platform, watching and listening intently to the work of the nine-hundred horse power locked within a frame of iron and steel. He held on to the rail with his left hand to

keep his balance, while his right gripped the handle of the storm-governor. The ship's stern was thrown up by the waves, and the exposed screw spun in the air. If the engine missed, the number of revolutions would shoot up from eighty to three hundred per minute. But the practised hand of the engineer, sensing that crucial moment, swiftly pushed up the handle of the storm-governor and reduced the steam pressure.

The water continued to pour through the skylights. Struck by the weight of the cold masses, the men shivered and ducked their heads. The whole engine was white with precipitated salt. The water rolled backwards and forwards under the deck plating with a menacing growl.

"Rig the hand pump!" the engineer commanded.

At the same time an eye had to be kept on the bilges.

"The water is still rising," the engineman reported.

"Start the pump!"

The valve inlets in the holds often got choked, and the pumps ran idle. To put them in order the engineers and enginemen went down to lend the watch a hand.

The pitching and rolling of the ship made it hard enough to walk across the deck plating, which was slippery from the water and oil, but down there, working with violent jerks, it was still worse. The steel cranks swung about in the semi-dark, like three gigantic fists, squirting greasy spray. One had to be alert and take care what one clutched at when the ship lurched if one did not want to be squashed into a bloody pulp. And from above, harrowing men's very souls, came the thunderous tumult of the gale, as if up there on deck a herd of iron monsters were disporting themselves in an orgy of destruction. The men looked up at the skylights, waiting in an agony of suspense for the death-blow.

I looked in at the stokehold.

Here, next to each boiler, stood a man, grimy and perspiring, his chest bared and sleeves rolled up. Ash-

pits were raked out, then the furnace opened fiery jaws, demanding to be fed. Holding his shovel ready and balancing on widely planted legs, the stoker tried to toss the coal into the mouth of the furnace. But the ship lurched, and the coal missed the mark. Often the stoker himself would lose his balance and go flying over the plating to the other side of the bulkhead. He would scramble to his feet at once and go on with his job. In any event the furnace was fed and it roared with a fierce flame. Raking out the cinders was harder work still. They rolled about over the platform, white-hot and burning. The stokers, wearing heavy clogs, danced about on the iron plating, twisting their bodies like gymnasts in an effort to keep their balance. Meanwhile the water poured down from above, and when it came into contact with the burning-hot surface of the boilers and furnaces, scattered in hot sprays, scalding the men. Every now and then a warning cry rang out, "Look out!"

And the "black gang," dog-tired, worn out by the storm, and exasperated by its malicious tricks, cursed all the gods that were and had ever been.

There was nothing for it but to keep the ship in the wind's eye and wait for the weather to improve. That meant reversing our course and running for England. But as the engine was working only at half speed we were borne off somewhere in the direction of Germany or Holland. No one could say for sure because we had long since lost our bearings and had no idea of our position. The mercury began to rise a bit, although the gale, if anything, seemed to have freshened.

The grey-green dishevelled wildness of the sea, pitted with ridges and troughs, heaved beneath the wavering canopy of dirty, ragged clouds. The watery hills surged upwards only to collapse immediately into the black voids.

The frenzied wind howled in a strenuous note, evoking in response a snarl from the watery chasms; it scooped up armfuls of wave crests and dashed them into driving sprays. Foam flakes flew about in the sombre air like white birds.

The *Communist*, storming her way through precipitous seas, was tossed about like a black solitary nutshell. She was dealt blow after smashing blow without pause. The battened-down hold beams were splintered, tarpaulins were ripped, and hatches broken open. The sea was intent on depriving the ship of buoyancy.

What other treacherous designs did the gale have in store?

One's heart went cold at the thought.

"If the sea breaks into the holds——" the German began, then fell silent, as if frightened by his own thoughts.

Another man, a Russian, finished the sentence for him:

"Then it will be all up with us...."

But there was no time for idle speculation. Fully alive to the danger, the sailors, together with the third navigating officer, rushed over to the holds to avert disaster. One of the holds gave a lot of trouble. It was almost entirely open. A decisive battle was fought there. A new tarpaulin was drawn over the hatch, but the wind curled it up and tore it loose. Upheaving waves swept over the deck, swirling from side to side and drenching the men in foaming spray. The tensed human figures, with popping eyes, struggled and squirmed. Danger increased their strength tenfold; their muscles became supple steel, the fingers that gripped the wet edges of the tarpaulin became iron pincers. Some of them snorted dog-like and spat out the water that got into their nostrils and mouths. At last the tarpaulin was secured on one side of the hatch. The navigating officer, the boatswain and the sailors pressed it down with a thick iron hatch-securing bar, throwing all their weight upon it, their faces red with

exertion, while the broad-shouldered carpenter drove the wedges in with sweeping strokes of his hammer. When they were almost finished, someone suddenly yelled, "Look out!"

A wall of sea, curved inwards, dull-green like molten glass, towered above the ship. It crashed upon the deck with a sickening thud, covering all the men who were working at hold No. 3. Some were knocked off their feet and sent flying. One sailor was flung into the storm-scupper. He miraculously escaped death by clutching the fire-service pipe, to which he hung on desperately while the rest of his body dangled overboard. His comrades pulled him inboard.

"There's no nonsense about a gale, old chap. You've got to be wide awake."

The sailors coughed, clearing their lungs of the salt and bitter taste, and got down to work again.

The chief navigating officer decided to make his way aft to see how things were in the saloon, where the sea had long been playing havoc. The sea, it seemed, had only been waiting for that chance. It shot out of the chasm with an upward twist, towering and dishevelled, shaking grey matted locks. Gently it lifted the man up under the arm-pits as if he were a baby, swaddled him in white foam and swept him aft. Those who witnessed the scene stood frozen with horror, taking a last silent farewell of their comrade. But here the unexpected happened: in front of the poop the wave suddenly subsided with a hiss and flung the navigating officer against the bulwark. He staggered to his feet, his face bruised and bleeding, and ascended the bridge with difficulty.

"That was a narrow escape," he muttered, reeling like a drunken man.

The day was drawing to a close.

The *Communist* struggled on against tremendous odds. Her draft forward had increased. One of the sailors,

a brave agile man, decided to see how things were in the forecastle. Seizing his opportunity when the ship's bows reared high in the air, he made a dash for it. His manoeuvre was successful. He used the same method coming back, but unexpectedly a wave broke over the ship and raced forward madly, shaking a lathery tail. It overtook him midway, and twisting him into a black spinning ball, hurled him towards the cabins. He jumped up and ran up onto the bridge, rubbing his bruised knees and groaning.

"No bones broken?" the men asked him.

"I don't think so."

"You'll be all right, then."

"How is it in the forecastle?"

"Pretty bad. Half full of water. The sea has smashed all the bulkheads. You wouldn't know our quarters. All our dunnage is ruined."

"Dunnage be damned, so long as we make a landfall."

The storm raged unabated. It was terrifying to see the whole fore part of the ship plunging into the sea, and the huge foaming billows rolling with a roar towards the bridge, threatening to sweep away the superstructure. One waited for the death-blow with bated breath. But the next moment the ship's bows, with a painful shudder, rose to the surface again.

There came another night of terrors. It dragged on interminably, like a nightmare.

Again and again I went out of the wheel-house and stood on the bridge, exposed to the drenching waves and the driving wind that whipped the salt spray into my face. The blind murk of the raging night almost hurt my eyes. I stood listening to the hostile sounds. Sometimes it seemed as if the *Communist* was beset by a mob of invisible foes, who roared, snarled and howled, smashing

the timbers, knocking out the rivets, clawing and gnawing the metal parts. Would this ever end?

I looked at the navigating officers—their jaws were clenched, and their eyes, bloodshot like those of drunkards with a hang-over, had a strained, agonized expression in them. The *Communist* was drifting—no one knew where. She was being drawn into the roaring darkness, into the clamorous unknown. And somewhere in this sea lurked sunken treacherous rocks. In normal weather navigators knew where those granite-fanged monsters lay. But where were they now? They might be far away, or close at hand, right alongside, lying in wait for ships that had drifted off their course. Woe to the vessel caught in the grinning jaws of such a monster. It will sink its fangs into her iron keel, and not let go until it has torn her to pieces.

I came across the Estonian in the wheel-house.

"Well, Comrade Volodya, what do you say?"

"It's hell for this old tub of ours!" he said. "It's a wonder to me she stands the pounding!"

Rushed across heaving chasms and yawning watery graves, the men had had nothing to eat or drink for two days, and had gone without a wink of sleep. A triple alliance of wind, waves and darkness was leagued against the *Communist*. In this fight against overwhelming odds the men had expended their last ounce of strength. Despair clutched at their throats. No, the ship would never make land again. Our landfall was lost in this raging chaos, sombre and cold as the deeps themselves.

And the heart of the sailor groaned in mute anguish, rent by the savage fury of the storm.

I was so fagged out that I no longer felt any fear. My mind was dazed. I was sick of it all. It were easier to face the firing squad, I thought, than to perish in this savage-voiced murk, this black brutal tumult of sea and sky, this frenzied uproar of infinity.

Almost lying on the table in the wheel-house, clutching the edge of it, I saw, as in a dream, the third navigating officer come in and start hurriedly wiping his binoculars. He was drenched from head to foot, and his teeth chattered. "I've sighted something out there, I'll find out what it is . . ." he said excitedly.

While he was speaking, I suddenly reminded myself of what one of the crew had said about him, "His eyes bore into the darkness like a cork-screw into a cork."

The navigating officer ran out again and reappeared in a minute or two.

"It's the Borkum lighthouse!" he shouted exultantly.

It was cheering, if incredible, news.

The second navigating officer, who had gone down into the engine room to warm himself, was called in. His dark hair was grey with salt, and salt had settled on his eyelashes and eyebrows. He looked like an old man with a young virile face. All three officers peered out into the darkness ahead. Three lights, like tiny stars, could be seen: a red one in the middle and a white one on each side of it. Yes, it was Borkum, the lighthouse we so badly needed—our joy, our hope of return to the living world.

Another danger confronted us. Would we be able to swing the ship round on to her proper course?

"Hard astarboard!" commanded the first navigating officer, ringing the engine-room telegraph.

The engines pounded at full speed. The ship swung broadside on to the surging sea. Exerting all her strength, the plunging, lurching ship came round to starboard slowly but doggedly.

In a gap between the black clouds a crescent moon shone forth. It was the sky, looking down upon our risky evolution with a silvery half eye.

At last the voice of the navigating officer rang out loudly, "Keep her so!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" came the helmsman's glad cry.

The cyclone raged with impotent fury as its prey slipped from its clutches. The sea grew shallower with each passing mile, and the waves lost their force.

Towards evening the next day the *Communist*, much the worse for her experience, covered with the wounds of desperate battle, slowly steamed into the Kiel Canal. Our sufferings were over.

Smiles lit up the haggard faces of the sailors.

The next day workmen came on board to start repairs. They shook our hands and sincerely congratulated us.

That was when we first heard of the cyclone's victims. It appeared that five ships had been lost in the North Sea.

"Three steamers and two sailing-vessels," one of the workmen explained.

"Any survivors?" our sailors asked.

"Yes, several men off one of the sailing-vessels. They had lashed themselves to the masts. They were taken off after two days."

The sailors' eyes widened and they drew closer to the speaker.

"Alive?"

"Yes. But they were all sent to the hospital."

We had looked death in the face, too. It had stared at us out of the cold watery chasms that had yawned at our feet and clawed at us with the shaggy paws of the cyclone. Now nothing threatened us—the deck no longer rocked under our feet, and firm earth lay close at hand. And yet, when we heard of the death of those other seamen, a cold shiver ran up our spines.

Hammers rang out aboard the *Communist*, repairing the damages of the storm.

1923

IN OTRADA BAY

WE were heading for the distant shores of England. Our steamer was running steadily against the wind on a dark night, rocking rhythmically on the waves, while in the saloon, in the light of an electric lamp, the stout elderly ship's engineer was telling me the story of his life.

I'm a peaceful man, you know. If there's a row on anywhere, or a fight, you can count me out. My motto is neutrality. I can't help it, that's the way I'm made. I don't care much for politics except to hear people talking it. I leave that to others, those who are able to dance on the edge of a knife without cutting themselves. My business is to get on with my job. I got into the work habit when I was a kid back in the village. Father and I turned up plenty of land there.

I was lucky with the military service, though. Got into the Navy, first as ordinary seaman, right and proper, but the next year I was already serving as stoker. Then, thanks to my diligence, I got sent to a school for Engine-Room Artificers. Finished that in two years. After that everything was smooth sailing. Worked myself up

to warrant officer, and after the Revolution got my Engineer's certificate. True, it had cost me twenty odd years of hard work. I changed many ships during that time. Sailed in battleships, cruisers, destroyers and submarines. I can say without boasting, though, that I came to know ship's engineering inside out, like your Moslem mullah knows his Koran.

I had no great liking for the government under the tsarist regime—I always thought it unpopular. To be sure, I went to fight for it, but then I had to. And then those rumours about treachery got about. Finally Rasputin came into the picture. All that got my dander up, but not enough to start me hissing like a breaker against a cliff or to make a revolutionist out of me.

But the Revolution came in spite of me. It burst like a hurricane, and scattered the old government to the winds like so much rubbish. Frankly, it sort of lighted up a new sun inside of me. Together with others, I felt as if I had had new blood pumped into me. And then, as you know, the Civil War started.

I didn't exactly like the way things were going. They put me on my guard.

Mind you, I'm a law-abiding man, I like peace and quietness above all. For all that I got caught up in the eddy against my will. To this day I can't help shuddering when I recall an incident I was mixed up in.

I was in one of the outlying districts of Russia at the time—in the kingdom of the Whites. It was there that the "saviours" of the country started to raise their heads. There was a rattling of sabres, and the old officers and generals went about sporting tsarist army rig. Priests joined the insurgents, gave them the blessings of the Church and prayed for the success of their arms. All you heard around you was: "Save the country!"

They wanted to mobilize me, too, but I was too old a bird to be caught with chaff. Forty-nine was no chick-

en's age. I signed up as engineer on a merchant steamer —the *Lebed*. She was a small craft of a thousand-ton register, and about my age, too.

I still stuck to my rule not to take sides, and steered clear of politics. For me work, no matter where it's done, is always in the long run a service to humanity. At least, that's how I looked at it.

They mobilized my eldest son Nikolai. He served in the army for several months, then, not being a fool, he went and deserted. One fine day he turns up.

"Hullo, folks!"

My wife and I got a nasty shock. And the trouble he gave us!

Something's got to be done about it, we thought.

Up in the North I had a pal, a true friend—Saim, his name was. I decided to send my son to him. Otherwise he'd be done for. Out there the devil himself wouldn't find him.

"Nikolai," I says, "you're going up North to Saim. I'll give you some money. You'll stay with him until this bloody hurrah's nest is over, and then, I daresay, we'll see you back safe and sound."

A hard-working, dutiful lad, Nikolai was. Always answered the helm. I have nothing but good to say of him. He was my pet. But here he kicked.

"I didn't desert from the army," he says, "to hide myself like an eel-pout under a stone. I want to fight for Right."

"You call that Right," I says, "when brother has risen against brother, and blood is fighting its own blood?"

But it was no use arguing with him. Wouldn't yield an inch. He had me and my wife crying almost.

He went off to the hills and joined the partisans.

My grey head bowed under the blow. It started me thinking. Coming home after a voyage the place would seem empty and cheerless to me. My wife was always in tears, and the moment she'd see me she'd start nagging.

"When are you going to stop working for those scoundrels?" she says. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, going against your own flesh and blood!"

She's a simple soul, my wife, barely able to read and write, but she's a fine woman.

"My ship's a merchantman," I says, "not a naval vessel. You know it as well as I do. I'm preserving neutrality."

"What a word to think up!" she says. "I don't care a fig for your neutrality."

I have a son, Pavlik, a black-eyed sturdy little fellow, sharp as they make 'em. He had just turned fifteen. Hearing our talk, he says, just as serious as can be, "Let's go and join the partisans, Dad, and be done with it."

I glared at him.

"Who's put that idea into your head?" I says.

And he comes back in a hurt tone, "Yegor's father is fighting on the side of the partisans, and what are we doing? Nothing. Have we sold ourselves out to the bourgeoisie, or what?"

Yegor Surkov was a year older than my son. They were chums. Yegor's father was a former Leningrad turner. He had been serving on the *Lebed* as engineman, but had chucked up his berth a month before.

I banged my fist on the table.

"Look here, Pavlik," I says, "you'd better get those ideas out of your head. Don't let me hear anything more about it. You've got to study. D'you hear?"

The boy looked as sulky as a young jackdaw in a storm, and comes out in a bass voice, "I heard you. I'm not deaf."

"Have you anything more to say for yourself?"

"You're funking...."

That got my goat. I boxed his ears. And would you believe it, instead of singing small, he tells me straight to my face:

"Just the same I'll run away and join the Reds."

Well, I says to myself, the world's gone topsyturvy. This revolution's got my family life tied up in a tricky knot and there's no undoing it.

Things got so that I felt sick of life. And something told me that I hadn't seen the end of my troubles either.

I wasn't mistaken.

They elected me to the Executive of the Seamen's Union. I didn't want to take such a responsible post, and at this of all times. I set my face against it, but in the end they talked me into it.

I still sailed in the *Lebed*, and after each passage I attended the meetings and fulfilled my public duties. I began to notice that the government was steadily turning Right. On top of that foreign troops had appeared, and were helping our generals to do their dirty work. All life was straight-jacketed—you'd think there'd never been a revolution. The seamen were having the screw put on tighter, too. I was up to my neck in work.

I got word from Nikolai that he was safe and sound. He wrote that their forces were growing. I found myself ever more often thinking of my son's aims. The Reds at least were fighting for the people's good. But what were the Whites doing? They were just scummy bubbling froth. How could those people call themselves "saviours" of the country when they were supported by foreign bayonets? Gradually, under the influence of events, my sympathy passed over to the side where my eldest son was. I got keen on public work, and often caught myself uttering in speeches, "We who have come from the factories and fields, the mines and mills, and they who have descended marble staircases, wearing gold epaulets." Through the bloody murk one could already catch glimpses of a new life, rising from the melting pot of the Revolution.

One day I came to the Seamen's Union, and walked straight into the arms of the secret police, who were raiding the premises.

"As bad a scoundrel as the rest of them, and he calls himself an engineer," one of the police agents said.

That got my wind up.

"I've never been a scoundrel, and I wouldn't advise you to be one!" I snapped back.

"Shut up," he yelled, brandishing a revolver, "or I'll plug your throat with lead!"

I never thought I could flare up the way I did.

I stuck my chest out and bore down on him.

"You can't scare me. I've seen too much of life to be scared by the likes of you. Come on, hit me if you dare!"

"We'll see what song you'll sing in a few days."

"Mind it isn't one sung at your own funeral."

Shows you how wild I was—just sticking my neck into the noose. They clapped me into the hold of an iron barge. There were about fifty of us there. They made short work of people they arrested those days—just took them out to sea in a barge and chucked them overboard, food for the fishes.

I looked at my comrades and read my own doom in their eyes. It made my heart bleed to think of home. Did they know what had happened to me, I wondered. My grey head drooped, crawling with cheerless thoughts like boxed up lobsters. I began to repent having broken my golden rule to keep out of harm's way.

I got into a scrape once before, when I was serving in the navy, but then I had managed to get out of it quick enough. I was engine quartermaster at the time. It was a piddling affair. A pal of mine—he was an engine quartermaster, too—had smuggled a bottle of liquor aboard. I was the only man who knew it. Well, that bottle disappeared. I met my friend in the waist, and all of a sudden he went for me.

"Did you take the bottle?"

That put my monkey up.

"Are you crazy? You know perfectly well I don't drink."

Well, one word led to another, and we came to blows. He knocked two of my teeth out, and I bashed his nose sideways. I don't know how long we'd have socked each other if we hadn't been pulled up by a stern shout, "What's the meaning of this!"

It was the chief officer. At the sight of him we jumped to attention.

"Just a lark, sir," I answered him first.

"A lark?" the chief officer queried, glancing at our battered faces.

"Yessir, having a bit of fun," my friend confirmed.

The chief officer held his sides with laughter—what else could he do?—and sent us to have a wash. And so we escaped the lock-up.

Since then I didn't get into any more scrapes as long as I served in the navy.

But coming back to what I was saying. We were kept in that barge for two days, and on the third I was called out to the Secret Police Department to be interrogated.

"What were you doing, Mr. Razdolny, in the offices of the Seamen's Union?"

Captain Anosyev, my interrogator, sat on one side of the table, and I on the other. His face showed none of that ferocity I had heard so much about. On the contrary, it was a harmless-looking face with a fair little beard and a short moustache. His hair was parted in the middle in a straight line, as if it had been ruled off with a razor.

I gave my evidence calmly, taking my time and weighing each word. I was careful to stress the fact that we did not go in for politics, our aims being purely economic. I talked nineteen to the dozen, smooth as an ora-

tor. The captain sat listening wearily with his head propped up in his hands and looked at me as though he agreed with every word I said. Then all of a sudden he says quietly, almost in a friendly way, "Where is your eldest son Nikolai?"

My mouth suddenly went dry.

"Up till now he's been in the army. You ought to know more about it than I do."

"And so we do. We know that at one time he was in hiding at your house and now he's a bandit, one of the partisan gang."

I felt as if the interrogator had kicked me into a coffin.

"Maybe you also don't know, Mr. Razdolny, that the Seamen's Union has been supplying the partisans with arms?"

The coffin lid banged down. I was suffocating.

All I could say was, "I don't know anything."

He pressed a button. Armed men came in. Captain Anosyev jerked his head in my direction and said coolly, "Take him away."

I found myself back in the barge hold. Others were called up for interrogation too. This went on for a whole week. And then they started sorting us out. Some were let off, others sent to prison. Fifteen of us were left in the barge. From that moment death took up its berth in our gloomy hold. Men stopped eating, turned black in the face, and jumped up time and again during the night. You felt like smashing your head against the wall. Guards were posted at the hatchway in the day-time, and at night it was shut down with heavy hatch covers and locked. We waited for the barge to be towed out to sea in an agony of suspense. We could vividly imagine coal sacks being tied over our heads and then each man being thrown overboard. Afterwards, our relatives would be told that the arrested men had been deported to Soviet Russia. At least, such had been the fate of all the men

who had been thrown into this death-barge before us. We knew that only too well and already felt the deathly cold breath of the fathomless deeps on the backs of our heads.

Every one of us shrank, subdued in face of the inevitable. It was especially painful at those moments when some steam vessel approached our barge. At the sound of the screws we froze in dumb terror. One's heart sickened at the ghastly thought that they had come for our barge. Faces went deathly pale, jaws dropped. Some stared at the hatchway with vacant unblinking eyes. Two men retched with fear, as if they were seasick.

That went on every day.

Unexpectedly we got a new addition to our company—engineman Surkov. He was brought in in the evening, a big man, slightly round-shouldered and stooping, but as strong as an anchor fluke. There was straw chaff in his hair. He spoke briskly and cheerfully, as if he had come to a stag-party instead of to a bunch of prisoners under sailing orders.

"Well, comrades, here we are! How do you do!"

We all crowded round him.

"Tell us what's going on outside."

"Splendid goings-on. The Red troops are pushing forward on all fronts. What? The partisans?"

Surkov looked round, then whispered excitedly:

"We'll have a whole division soon. The workers and peasants are like gunpowder. New men are joining us every day. We've got weapons too. Only the other day I shipped fifty hand grenades, several rifles and a machine-gun down to the detachment. What? Where we got them from? The soldiers gave them to us and came over themselves. Eight of 'em. Guards. And our intelligence? We get reports from town every day. Know everything that's going on there, even what the White generals have for

dinner. The only thing I don't know is where that young scrub of mine has got to."

"Who is that?" we asked.

Suddenly, without answering, he turned to me, saying, "Have you heard anything about that little squirt of yours, old chap?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your son Pavel and my Yegor—where are they?"

The air in the barge hold suddenly grew thick with menace. I looked at Surkov dumbfounded. He towered above me with a darkened face and squeezed out grimly through set lips, "Yes, old chap, they've both disappeared. Either they've been arrested or something else has happened to them."

My comrade's news stunned me. It all but killed me that night. The iron bottom of the barge seemed to be made of ice. My whole body shivered as if with the ague. I got up many times to question Surkov, and lay down again, dazed by his answers. The world seemed to me a mad-house.

The next day Surkov said to us, "They've caught me red-handed—I have nothing to lose."

"But what can you do?" somebody asked.

Surkov's fists clenched. An angry gleam came into his brown eyes.

"What, me, with my strength, dying like a meek lamb! No fear! I know what to do."

He asked leave of the guard to go to the lavatory. He was led out. Presently we heard wild shouts, the stamp of feet and rifle shots. What had happened up there? We knew nothing. But that was the last we ever saw of Surkov and of the snub-nosed guard who had escorted him.

Later on the new guard flung at us menacingly, "The whole damned lot of you ought to be killed."

None of us cared to follow the example of our comrade.

We sat cowering and spiritless in the bottom of the barge, waiting miserably for our death hour.

The next day I heard my name called from aloft.

"Razdolny! Come on out!"

I went cold all over, as if an ice crust had formed over me.

We went ashore. I had no idea where the guards were taking me. My legs had gone leaden and buckled under me. It was as if my very soul, and not my body, were swaying in the wind like a solitary tree. I looked at the smiling blue of the sky, filled my lungs with the fresh September air and felt better.

A steam launch was waiting for us at the wharf, and in fifteen minutes I was put aboard my ship, the *Lebed.* Officers were there with revolvers, and some three hundred soldiers and cadets, armed with rifles, machine-guns and hand grenades. On top of that there were about a dozen and a half horses. My benumbed brain grasped only one fact—that my execution had evidently been put off. All these men were out on some serious business in which my presence was required. But there was little comfort for me in that.

The lieutenant who was commanding the vessel in place of the old captain was familiar to me. He called me up on the bridge and said sternly, "It was I who sent for you. Mind that everything's in order. If we notice anything suspicious you'll have short shrift. Is that clear?"

For a moment hope stirred in me, and I looked at the lieutenant's clean-shaven face imploringly.

"We'll be raising anchor in an hour and a half. You may go."

"Yes, sir!" I answered mechanically.

Escorted by a guard, I went down into the engine room.

Three enginemen were sitting on a bench, drinking tea and chatting. One of them, a burly jaunty man whose

name, as I afterwards found out, was Masloboyev, laughed uproariously when he saw me.

"Ah, here's the Bolshevik!"

A retort sprang to my lips, but I checked it. All I said was, "What ship did you sail in before?"

Masloboyev turned out to be a chatty fellow and answered readily enough, "Before? Ho, ho, ho! I didn't sail, I flew, one might say, flew about on land engines. Hauling railway trains."

He was tipsy. He had watery eyes and a web of purple veins on his big nose. His watch was coming on in two hours.

The second engineman, Pozyabkin, was a broad heavily built man, morose and taciturn. He was on duty.

The third was a young curly-haired fellow with a broad smile and engaging look. He seemed to sympathize with me. His watch was not due for some time yet.

"I'll go to the forecastle," he said. "Turn the flukes. If anything happens wake me up."

I looked in at the stokehold, the guard trailing behind me. There was a hubbub in there—the ship's stokers were arguing with the landsmen amid a good deal of arm-waving and shouting. I immediately grasped what it was all about. In one boiler steam had been raised to the mark, in the other the hand of the steam-gauge showed only sixty pounds pressure.

"This isn't a railway engine for you, damn it!" one of the ship's stokers was shouting.

"What's the difference?" one of the landsmen said.

"The difference is that you know this business about as much as a lobster knows the Bible."

Then he turned to me, saying, "Well, Bolshevist engineer, which of us is right?"

There was not a man left of the old crew; they were probably all arrested.

I wondered where they'd picked up all these men.

I ignored their dispute and promptly climbed up the boiler casing to connect the steam of both boilers. It took me less than a minute. When I got down I showed the stokers how to keep steam up in the boilers. Then I divided them into watches, leaving only two of them and sending the rest to turn in—and went back to the engine room.

I examined the engine. It was dirty, rusty, and neglected. I tested the parts and oiled them. Put everything in apple-pie order. The gloomy engineman Pozyabkin helped me fairly conscientiously.

Masloboyev sat drinking tea and jabbering. I noticed, though, that he regarded me with interest, as if I were some queer specimen. He kept pestering me with questions.

"The Communists are out to make an earthly paradise and brag that they know everything. Now tell me, Mr. Bolshy, who's the most unhappy baby in the world?"

He fell silent, sticking his long neck out towards me. Without waiting for my reply, he gave a triumphant laugh, waved his hand as if thrumming a balalaika and said thickly:

"You don't know, eh? Well then, I'll tell you. The unhappiest baby in the world is a little pig; it only has a mother, and she's a pig. You don't know that because you don't go to the circus."

I ignored Masloboyev's sneers, and began to pump him carefully.

"Shall we be out long?" I asked.

"Oh, no—five hours."

"Where are we going?"

Every word of his burnt into my brain.

"All I know is that we're going to give the partisans a walloping. Ho, ho, will they get it hot! But mum's the word, boy. Not a squeak!"

I couldn't get my son out of my mind. There were no

other partisans in the vicinity except the detachment to which Nikolai belonged. The partisans were somewhere in the hills, not far from the coast. At rest, probably, and off their guard, little suspecting that a landing party of well-armed soldiers would be put ashore. They would be surrounded and mopped up. Perhaps, at the last moment, Nikolai would see his father. What would he think?

My lips twitched nervously.

"You must have been stealing chickens, Mr. Bolshy," Masloboyev said.

I turned round and stared at him. I saw his face with its big nose and sneering mouth as if through a haze.

"What chickens?"

"Don't you know? Ho, ho.... Then why are your hands shaking?"

Shortly the engine began to throb. After a while I could feel the roll of the ship, and realized that we were putting out to sea.

The guard kept his eye on me all the time. Besides his rifle he had stuck away under his belt a hand grenade. His presence was a constant reminder that I was a doomed man. I did not have the slightest doubt that when this trip was over I would be thrown overboard with a weight tied round my neck. To make things worse, I kept picturing Nikolai to myself—fair-haired, blue-eyed, such a lively inquisitive lad; he had dreamt of studying up and joining the Engineering College, and I had encouraged him in it. And now? That healthy youngster who had his whole life before him would soon be killed, wiped out.

My head was in a whirl with these tormenting thoughts.

I worked automatically, by force of habit, my brain taking no part in the process. My hands moved of their own accord.

With every heave of the vessel my guard looked round

with a flicker of fear. His pale face took on a greenish tinge, and his eyes looked glazed. He laid his rifle down on the deck plating and clutched the bench to keep himself from falling.

"I wish you in hell together with this blasted ship! Christ, I feel sick. . . ."

The roll of the ship did not have such a bad effect on the engineman.

"D'you know what's happened to Zubaryov's partisan detachment?" he was telling me. "Wiped out. And the Chizhayev gang? Rounded up, every man of 'em, and strung up in the sun to dry. Why, man alive, they've got guns here, rifles, machine-guns, and there all they've got is shotguns and spikes. It's like sheep trying to fight lions!"

I tried to keep my ears shut against him, but his words battered at my brain with fiendish and maddening persistency. I felt like flinging myself upon him and throwing him under the swinging crank. But I held my peace and took a stronger grip upon myself.

Masloboyev stepped up closer.

"I say, Mr. Bolshy, why do you Communists want to overthrow even God Himself?"

Ordinarily I treated people's religious feelings with respect and tolerance, but here I went right off the handle. There must have been murder in my eyes, because when I stepped up to the engineman, he took a look at me and fell back quickly.

"Your face is like a wild cat's," he said.

It cost me a tremendous effort not to fly at his throat.

I decided instead to give tit for tat.

"I'd like to ask you a question, Mr. Engineman, if you don't mind," I said through clenched teeth.

"Well?"

"Have you a wife?"

"Yes."

"You love God, don't you?"

"Naturally—God's the beginning and the end, the first and the last."

"Good. Now tell me, what would you do if you found your wife in bed with God?"

Masloboyev staggered as if he had been hit, and shouted furiously, "You devil!"

He turned away and quickly ascended the iron ladder.

It was then that an idea came to me at which I quailed myself.

I was in the enemy's camp. And war is war. It wasn't I who invented it, may it be thrice cursed! It was a question of getting your man or letting him get you. If we didn't beat them they'd beat us. What did I stand to lose? I was as good as dead in any case. So why not send the whole bally lot of 'em to Davy Jones's locker! And that's what I decided.

To this day I can't make out what came over me. I was like a regular fiend.

With cold-blooded deliberation I planned wholesale destruction. And of whom? Of living men. But weren't those hiding in the hills living men too? I hardened my heart and shut it to all feeling of pity and remorse.

My watchmate was still gloomily silent.

"Where's our ship bound for?" I asked him.

He looked at me like a policeman at a beggar.

"You'd better ask the skipper that," he answered brusquely and turned away.

The ship rolled heavily, and the wind sang in the ventilators.

The pistons slithered in the cylinders, and the cams rolled lazily. The cranks on the other hand swung busily, as if anxious not to lag behind one another in their work. The screw shaft revolved laboriously. Amid all these familiar noises I laid my plans and worked out every little detail.

The sea-cocks would have to be opened, and then the sea would rush inside the ship with terrific force. But that was not all. To sink the ship her holds would have to be flooded too. That meant opening the gate-valves by way of which the engine room communicated with the nearest holds. As for the emergency pump, a couple of blows with the sledge-hammer would put that out of gear.

But how was all that to be done?

I looked at my guard—he was lying flat on his back, dead to the world.

My watchmate, too, was beginning to feel seasick.

"I've stood out my watch," he said to me. "I'll go and look for Masloboyev."

"Certainly," I said with a friendly nod.

I took advantage of his absence to examine the gate-valve of the rear hold.

To my great joy I found it open. All I had to do now was to jam it. I did this by winding a length of wire round the thread of the spindles. Then I got ready a sledge-hammer, a chisel and a spanner and laid them next to the sea-cocks. I went into the store-room and got out a lifebelt, just in case. I could get down to work now. But suddenly it occurred to me that nothing might come of it. I might be killed before I even started on the job. And I wanted to strike with dead certainty, I wanted to see the enemy destroyed with my own eyes.

Masloboyev took the watch. Somehow he didn't seem so objectionable to me now.

"How are things aloft?" I asked him.

"Pretty rough sea! Wind's a regular howler. No sign of any coast. Our foot-sloggers are rolling about holding their bellies like they got the bloomin' cholera. What do you think, Mister Bolshy, will they be able to fight after taking all this knocking?"

"I don't know. But tell me, why do you keep calling me Bolshevik? I never was one, not even in my dreams."

"Tell it to your grandmother! I know an owl by its flight."

He reflected for a moment, then added, "No matter how a dog twists and turns he's always got his tail behind him."

I showed him how to feel the swinging cranks. It was rather difficult for anyone who didn't have the knack of it, and he was liable to hurt his hand. Oddly enough I worried over such a trifle without thinking that this man was doomed to death along with the rest. Masloboyev rambled on again.

"What are the Communists after, I can't make out."

"I daresay you can't. You've got to have something in your head besides vermin."

The engineman said something, but I was not listening. I had conceived a new plan—to blow up the cylinders.

As the ship's engineer, I could do that quite easily. The engine room would then become an inferno into which no one would dare to descend in order to save the ship. That would give me a free hand.

A whistle sounded. I went over to the voice pipe.

"How much is the engine doing?" asked the captain.

"Fifty-eight revs," I answered.

The captain got angry.

"Work her up to seventy!"

"Aye, aye, sir! But I'd like you to know that the stokers are taking it too easy."

"Tell them I'll have them arrested!"

"Very good, sir."

I passed the captain's orders to the stokers. They laughed at me, but nevertheless took up their shovels and started feeding the furnaces.

I took my time putting my plan into execution.

It was a rather intricate plan. Not being a specialist, you wouldn't grasp it, I daresay. But I'll try and explain it to you. You see, all the working parts of an engine are carefully balanced and calculated. My idea was to upset that balance. I gave the cylinders more oil than they needed. Oil that gets into the cylinders passes afterwards into the cooler, and from there it reaches the boilers by way of the air-pumps and feed-pumps. What's more, I overoiled the port boiler, with the result that the water in it starts boiling and escapes into the engine together with the steam. And that, in turn, will lead to a cylinder explosion.

I looked at the water-gauge of the port boiler. The water in it was three-quarters up. Things were going splendidly. I waited eagerly for the explosion, cool and impassive as a piece of iron in a frost. The water-gauge dial began to turn milky—the awful moment was coming.

Suddenly a new idea welled up from somewhere deep down within me. I would have plenty of time to sink the ship. I wanted to see the fight. Another question was—where were we bound for? As a matter of fact, however, I was merely trying to deceive myself. I simply wanted to prolong my life for another hour or two.

I eased the engine and ran into the stokehold.

"Close the ash-pit of the port boiler!" I shouted. "Bank the fire! We're in danger."

This time the stokers jumped smartly to the order, no doubt galvanized by the note of alarm in my voice and the expression of my face.

I went back into the engine room and sank exhausted onto a stool. I sat there, listening to the boom of the sea. Afterwards, when the danger was over, I stepped up the engine.

Masloboyev started off at me again.

"I heard say that folks haven't got the price of a dinner in that communist paradise of yours. Is that true?"

"What about you here?" I countered.

"We can't complain, thank God. In case of anything the foreigners will help us."

Foreigners were my sore spot, and I shouted, exasperated, "What for? Just for love?"

"I don't know and I don't care. The thing is that they're helping us."

"When they're through helping, every Russian will have only the sleeves of his waistcoat left."

We kept on at it until the ship steadied. The howling in the ventilators broke off suddenly. Masloboyev jumped up.

"I'll go and see what's doing aloft."

My body-guard staggered to his feet, looking as if someone had been sweeping the coal-bunker out with him.

The engine-room telegraph clanged several times, passing orders down from the bridge. I stopped the engines, reversed them, then turned the governor back to "stop." Presently I heard the rumble of the anchor chain. Everything grew still in the engine room.

"What's this, have we arrived?" the guard asked me, recovering from his seasickness.

"Only those up on the bridge can tell you that."

"I wish to God your blasted ship was at the bottom of the sea. It's a place for water-devils, not men."

I noticed for the first time that he had a chubby good-natured face, covered with bristles, and innocently clear, wide-open eyes. That boy, who had lived in this world for twenty-five years, apparently understood nothing of what was going on around him. I felt a twinge at my heart, but my resolve was unshaken.

"You don't like going about in ships, I see?" I said.

"No, I'm serving ashore, thank goodness. The sea would kill me."

Masloboyev came in.

"Heard the news! One partisan has been spotted al-

ready. He popped up between the hills on a bike. They've got scouts, the blighters—would you believe it! Just like a regular army. But the moment he saw we hadn't come here to play hide-and-seek, he beat it quick. They haven't a dog's chance against us. If I was in their boots I'd buzz off and hide in the woods."

I succeeded by a violent effort in concealing my agitation.

"So there won't be any fight then," I said unconcernedly.

"What d'you think the horses are for? To chase 'em. They're beginning to lower the boats up there."

The stamp of feet and shouts aloft confirmed Masloboyev's words. An electric shock went all through my body.

"Yes, but where have we stopped?" I asked in a casual way.

"Now what's the name of that bay, damn it? Ah, yes, Otrada Bay, that's it. Hills all round. A wild spot."

The engineman went on speaking, but I was not listening. This place was where my son was. Not far away from here began the dense taiga, where the partisans had their hiding-place. From here they made raids on the surrounding villages, killing the Whites and collecting weapons for themselves. That much I knew from Nikolai's last letter. He had been quite sure that their hide-out would never be discovered. But they had been tracked down all the same. And now the Whites would start wiping them out.

The blood hammered in my temples, and my head felt as if a crank were swinging around in it. I lost all count of time. Suddenly the first shots rang out. From up on deck there came a stamping of feet, men shouted. The engineman kept running in and out, wild with excitement and fairly bursting with news. I did not understand a word he was telling me. And then the searing thought

flashed across my mind, seeming to burn into my very brain—why had I not sunk the ship before her arrival? Now all my hopes were dashed. I stood as if in a trance, crushed and bewildered. My cap flew off my head. Picking it up, I saw a small hole in the peak. Evidently a bullet had entered the skylight and ricochetted off the plating.

"Lucky it didn't hit you in the head," Masloboyev said with a note of concern.

That sobered me. I pulled myself together. No, I was not going to give up my plan. Suddenly everything stood out clearly, as things do on a frosty morning.

It turned out that the landing party had no sooner tumbled into the boats than the partisans hidden in the hills met them with a raking fire.

It was so unexpected that the Whites were thrown into a panic. They deserted the boats, scrambled back onto the steamer, and made a dash for the safety of the holds. I could hear the screams of the wounded.

"Now those are marksmen!" the engineman said without malice, with a tinge of admiration in his voice. "The minute the commander went up on the bridge—bang! —they got him! Shot right through the heart. They did the same for his mate. No one dares to show his nose aloft. The sons of guns! They must have a lot of hunters out there. Those fellows are crack shots—can hit a squirrel right in the eye with a single pellet, so's not to damage the skin. What do you think about this bust-up?"

"I don't think anything. It's none of my business."

The guard raised his limpid eyes and looked up nervously at the skylight.

A feeling of malicious glee swept over me. War is war.

I could not afford to waste a minute. I gave orders for the steam to be kept up at full pressure. The boilers began to quiver. So did I. I was like a reckless gambler, who, instead of gold, was staking three hundred human lives. None of them suspected that they were doomed. This grey

old head of mine had nothing but trumps in it. I held a winning hand.

I did not have to go aloft to imagine how things were up there. No one could ascend the bridge to occupy the command post. And there could be no question of raising the anchor. The Whites were in a pretty tight fix.

At last a midshipman managed to crawl into the engine room. He perched on the upper platform near the door and began issuing orders from there.

"Engineer! Full speed astern!"

It was clear to me that they intended to get out of the bay without raising the anchor. But I wasn't such a fool as to let the engine out at top speed.

In turn, I ordered the engineman, "Tell the stokers to look lively, otherwise we'll never get out of this hole."

"All right," he said, and dashed out to pass my orders on.

"Keep an eye on them while you're at it!" I shouted after him.

Everything was now ready for the explosion of the cylinders, and I kept glancing impatiently at the water-gauge dial. I felt as though I had my enemy by the throat, and all I had to do was to choke the life out of him.

I glanced at the guard. He had taken several steps up the ladder and hesitated. For some reason he felt for his hand grenade under his belt and threw his head back to look up.

"Full ahead!" came the anxious voice of the midshipman.

I shifted the governors. The *Lebed* shuddered, as if bracing herself to meet a storm.

Apparently the anchor flukes were firmly embedded in the ground. The ship could move only the length of her cable. We shuttled back and forth for a long time.

Suddenly I noticed that the water in the water-gauge had started to bubble. After a while it turned white, as if

milk had been poured into it. This was the end. Only a few minutes of life remained....

"War is war," I repeated coolly to myself.

I gave the engine full speed.

The anchor chain snapped from the strain.

The officer yelled exultantly, "We're off at last, confound it!" He thrust his head out of the engine room and commanded in a shrill shaky voice, "Tell the man at the wheel to steer seawards!"

There was a knock in the engine, then came a second stronger jolt. I knew what that meant, and sprang out into the stokehold just in time. There came a thud, like a cannon shot, and then a sharp crash with a metallic clang in it. The cylinder lid, blown off by the high pressure, had come crashing down. The whole engine room filled with steam, which was fairly hot even lower down. It escaped with terrific force and a piercing hiss. The uproar was so great that it drowned the screams of the terrified men.

As though through a fog, I saw something squirming below on the metal plating. I went up closer and bent down to take a better look. It was the guard, his belly ripped open. He writhed, tried to jump up, but fell back again. I remembered the hand grenade he had carried at his belt.

For a moment I was dazed, then I rushed over to the portside, where the sea-cocks were. I nearly stumbled over the body of the midshipman. Stunned and scalded, he barely stirred. I had to grope my way through clouds of scalding steam and work in the dark. With practised hands I swiftly got the nuts unscrewed. I was spurred on by a single drilling thought—to get the job done quickly. At last the cock caps were thrown back by the inrush of water, which tore into the vessel in a roaring torrent. There was something else I had to do. Seizing the sledge-hammer, I began to rain blows on the valve rods of the

salvage pump. I had carried out my plan completely. Nothing now could save the ship. Three hundred men had been struck off life's register. As though wishing to make sure of it, I stood quite still for about a minute. The roar of the water mingled with the hiss of the steam. I listened to the music of it with clenched teeth. Everything had come off smoothly.

I took a look round. The midshipman lay as if dead. Crouching low, I crossed to the other side of the ship and bent over the dark sprawling shape that had been my guard.

"So that's that, old chap," I said to the dead man.

There was nothing more I could do. Now things would take their own course. There was a chance of saving myself, though. I had a cork life belt hidden under the plating. I snatched it and ran into the stokehold. There was not a single man there. Evidently they had all escaped up the ladder to the upper deck.

The first thing to do was to rake the fire out of the furnaces. This would lessen any risk of the boilers exploding. I seized a rake and fell to work like a fiend. Water appeared from under the plating and steadily began to rise. The waterlogged disabled ship listed heavily to port. But in my heart there was neitheir fear nor remorse.

When the water flooded the furnaces, I stopped working and listened. The noise of escaping steam could still be heard. Overhead the horses neighed in terror and men shrieked wildly. I could clearly picture the enemy's plight. It was desperate. There was no sense in staying on the sinking ship, so the Whites jumped overboard in the hope of saving themselves. Most of them drowned, others were shot in the head by the marksmen from the shore, and those who got ashore and tried to escape were bayoneted.

I put on the life belt. I waited a bit while the water kept rising, then opened the grate and crawled into the funnel. The cries aloft were fainter now.

By and by the water covered the boilers. The ship had now righted herself. The steam was gone. Through the mouth of the funnel I could see a round bit of darkened sky with twinkling stars. Nightfall probably. Something seethed furiously around me. It was the air escaping.

I weighed my chances of saving myself. The odds were five to a hundred, I reckoned. Even less. I don't know why, but I expected the boilers to explode at any moment. I'd be blown sky-high then. There was also another danger —the ship might run aground, and then I'd never get out of this black hole. I was floating in an iron ring less than five feet in diameter, and slowly freezing. My teeth chattered with cold.

The horses snorted. Someone moaned piteously, "Comrades, help——"

Another hoarsely implored, "Water . . . just a drop. . . ."

These heart-sickening cries came from the wounded who had been left lying about on deck. Three hundred men had been killed, and I alone was responsible for their death.

They, too, had wives, and children, and mothers.

I looked up at the sky. The stars shone down cold and serene. As if challenging someone, I asked, "Well, what now?"

Nothing remained for me but to smash my head against that accursed funnel.

Suddenly the *Lebed* lurched and shuddered, preparing for the final plunge. The water gave way beneath her, and she began to sink with a hollow rumbling noise. The horses neighed in terror, throwing their last dying cry to the impassive stars. The water poured down through the funnel, almost crushing me with its weight. I spun round in the fierce eddy, going down together with the ship.

The cork life belt I was wearing threw me up to the surface. Gasping, my lungs choked with sea-water, I struck out for the shore.

Muscles tensed and nerves strained to breaking point, I hung on like grim death. In the distance, at the foot of the hills, I could see camp-fires burning. It flashed through my mind that this was the partisans' camp. Battered and freezing, I crawled ashore like a dog with a broken spine, crawled along the beach yelling myself hoarse.

"Hi, stop! Where the hell you think you're going!" came a sharp challenge.

Bayonets were levelled at me, ready to plunge into my half-dead body. I managed to moan, "Where's my son, Razdolny?" then collapsed.

I seemed to be back in the dark funnel again, spinning in the murderous whirlpool, which was sucking me down. But strong hands gripped my shoulders and shook me. I distinctly heard someone saying, "You've found him at last."

I felt myself being lifted and borne along, rocking as if on waves. A single thought worked in my confused brain: How could I be walking upon water? And when I saw the camp-fires and the men around them, I started to shout that it was I who had sunk the *Lebed*. Smiling faces, hundreds of them, crowded round me, dim figures shook my hands, jostled me about. Nikolai suddenly became Pavlik, then turned back again into Nikolai. And then everything went black, as if I had dived into a coal-bunker. After that came nightmare visions. This went on till morning.

I was surprised to find myself wearing someone else's dry clothes. A breeze fanned my face. The tree-tops swayed in the clear blue of the sky. Voices mingled oddly with the sounds of the taiga. I was still more surprised to see Pavlik next to me instead of Nikolai, with Yegorka at his side.

"We knew the *Lebed* was coming here, Dad," Pavlik said.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, breathless with joy and excitement.

"Do you know who brought us out here—Yegorka and me? Comrade Yevseyenko. You know him—the *Lebed*'s helmsman. Yegorka and me keep the camp-fires going and make tea for the partisans. The chief himself put us in charge. Honestly! Nikolai's the chief of staff. He's stuck up now and important. He doesn't spit through his teeth any more."

Pavlik fell over himself to tell me all the news. I still felt bad, and barely grasped what was happening. I could hardly believe that I was on firm ground again, safe among the partisans.

A little to one side stood a group of prisoners surrounded by guards. There were about forty of them. They had escaped by a miracle. Nikolai, looking grave and grown up, quite unlike the former naïve adolescent, was examining them. I had a dim recollection of the prisoners being sorted out. Masloboyev stood looking at me miserably from one of the groups, like a hopeless patient waiting for the doctor.

"Let that fellow go," I said.

The partisans thought it over, then told Masloboyev they were letting him go at my request. He looked up with a new light in his eyes.

"Comrades!" he said. "I was on the other side only because I was a fool. Let me stay with you now."

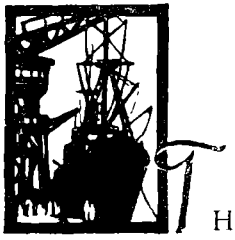
The partisans voiced their approval.

Ten of the prisoners were led away.

Wild screams rang out through the taiga.

Otrada Bay, surrounded by low shrubby hills, lay blue and peaceful. All that could be seen there was the top of the *Lebed*'s mast, rising out of the water like a cross, a symbol of the tragedy that had been enacted there.

1924



A WOMAN AT SEA

I

THE *Oktyabr*, a merchant steamer of four thousand tons register, lay at her berth, a scene of considerable stir and bustle. She was being loaded with pulp-wood for the Dutch paper-mills. The winches set up an endless clatter as they emptied the long lighters moored alongside the ship. Sharp commanding voices rose above the busy din.

"Heave ho!"

A great sling of cargo, consisting of metre-length logs, rose into the air, drawing the steel rope taut.

"Avast!"

The jib, resembling the long bill of some fabulous bird, swung round towards the open hatch. The workers and sailors on the deck stood alert, their heads thrown back. The cargo swayed menacingly overhead until the order was given to lower away.

The winch, in a cloud of steam, payed out the steel rope with a clank of its chain, and the huge sling shot down into the bowels of the ship. Down in the hot, stuffy hold sweating men grappled the logs with iron hooks, dragged them apart and stacked them compactly in rows under the direction of the stevedore. The huge crane hook, freed of

its burden, flew up again to come swinging through the blue cloudless sky with another sling of cargo. All four holds were being loaded simultaneously. The sound of human labour was like the booming of the surf.

Vasilisa, the servant, came out of a small cabin. She was a stout woman of about forty, born and bred in the waterside slums. She went forward with the rolling waddling gait of a seaman, her body sweaty, flabby and heavy, like soft cheese. Her grey all-knowing eyes looked out dully from an eyebrowless face with pendulous chin, seeking someone among the working men. Next to the hold she came across the second mate, a skinny fidgety man.

"I've got all your washing together, Polikarp Mikhailovich," she said to him. "I'll have to take it to the washerwoman right away if you want it done before we sail."

"All right," the second mate answered mechanically, jotting down some notes in his pocket diary.

"You'll have to let me go ashore after dinner."

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know. There's so much to do—giving the boots away to mend, then dropping in at the Raikomvod office. I'm afraid it'll keep me busy till the evening."

"You're to be back on board at six o'clock."

The woman was about to argue, but at that moment she saw the duty boat, which was pulling for the steamer. In the stern sheets sat seaman Bulanov, sculling, while on the thwart sat a woman, her head covered with a strawberry-coloured kerchief. Vasilisa stared at them with a puzzled air, but noticing a basket in the bottom of the boat, her face assumed the expression of a person who has solved a difficult problem.

Ah, to be sure, it was the new pantrywoman. With that red thing on her head, too. One of those flighty hussies by the looks of it, a Komsomol girl, probably. Why the devil did they take on people like that? They were about

as much use as a burnt matchstick, and talk about swank!

Vasilisa poured her indignation into the navigating officer's ear, but he stemmed the flow with an abrupt: "Stop wagging your tongue, woman! You're in my way. Attend to your business!"

"It's all very well for you, Polikarp Mikhailovich, but it's me that will have to work with her. That's what I'm driving at. I've had hell all my life as it is."

Seaman Brikalov slapped her ample thighs, and said, "You haven't done so bad down there for a sweet angel. I bet you weigh fourteen stone if you weigh an ounce."

"Keep your paws off me if you don't want a clout on the ear!" Vasilisa snapped.

Brikalov guffawed.

"Keep your hair on, popsy-wopsy! I didn't know you weren't to be touched in daylight."

"Avast there! Steady!" the command rang out.

There was a sudden hitch. All heads were turned towards the stern ladder, up which a little woman was ascending. She lingered for a moment on the bulwark, then sprang lightly onto the deck. The noonday sun fell upon her face, lighting up her fresh warm-tinted skin. She looked round with screwed-up eyes and smiled engagingly.

"What's the matter there—are you all paralyzed?" the foreman shouted angrily. "Turn to, look lively there!"

The work hummed again.

The new arrival addressed herself to two sailors, who were standing at the second hatch.

"How do you do, comrades," she said. "I've been given a job on your ship."

Her sun-kissed cheeks glowed with rich colour, and her golden eyes brimmed with happiness.

The sailors, who were wearing soiled work clothes, felt embarrassed and their answer lacked their usual spirit and dash.

"Glad to hear it. So you're the new pantrywoman?"

"Yes. Will you please tell me where——"

At that moment a sling of logs shot up and swung over their heads. A sharp warning command rang out above the din and hubbub, "Stand clear there!"

Before the girl had time to think, she was gripped, hoisted off her feet and heaved aside with a violent jerk. Her head jiggled as if it would come off. The next moment something crashed on the deck right next to her. Some heavy logs had slipped from the sling and come tumbling down.

"Oh, how dreadful!" the pantrywoman cried naïvely.

She was now standing under the captain's bridge.

Facing her was seaman Maxim Borodkin, a simple-hearted lad with ginger hair. It was he who had saved her from certain death. He was bent up almost double, clutching his left shoulder with a grimace of pain on his broad freckled face.

"You're not hurt, are you?" Borodkin said, staring wonder-struck at the pantrywoman.

"I'm all right, but what about you?"

"The tip of one of those logs just grazed my shoulder."

Vasilisa stood looking at them, tight-lipped, her arms folded on her bosom. "There you are, that's when the sinning starts," she said, shaking her head.

The second mate dashed up, fuming, "Dammit, there was nearly murder done! That winch-man is no good, he can't lower the cargo smoothly. And you, too, Comrade Borodkin, gaping there like a duck in a fit! Let me see where it hit you."

Borodkin showed him his back. His shirt was torn on the left shoulder-blade, revealing a bleeding gash in his flesh.

"Poor boy, he got that through me," said the pantrywoman, her face white and frightened.

"Go to the officers' saloon at once, Comrade Borodkin," the second mate commanded, "and tell the third mate to dress it for you."

Then he turned to the servant.

"Vasilisa! Show the new pantrywoman down to the saloon and explain her duties to her."

"Very well," the servant said with no great enthusiasm. The sailors followed the light-stepping shapely figure of the retreating pantrywoman with appreciative eyes. Brikalov, who was a competent judge of women, declared authoritatively, "That one's going to turn some heads."

"Yes, she's a stunner," one of the enginemen added.

The stern deck was raised above the rest of the deck. This part of the ship was called the poop. One had to pass through here, descend a spiral staircase and take several steps down a passage to reach the saloon. Adjoining it were two cabins—the captain's on the right, and the chief mate's on the left.

"This is your country, Tatiana. Everything here must be spick and span. It will also be your job to serve the officers their tea and meals. My job's to do the cabins amidships. I have eight of them there. Enough to keep me busy. A bigger handful than yours, anyway."

Vasilisa spoke in a smooth, treacly voice, but inwardly the sudden dislike she had conceived for the pantrywoman began to grow into hatred. Herself faded as an autumn leaf, she looked with anything but favour upon the youth and freshness of this girl who was to share with her a home on this ship in the company of thirty odd men.

Vasilisa then led the pantrywoman under the ladder and opened a door into a tiny cabin with a narrow cot against the hull and a single porthole.

"This is your cloister cell, in a manner of speaking. I must warn you, though—our captain won't have any sailors hanging around here. No love-making, you know, God forbid!"

Tatiana blushed furiously.

"I don't know why you talk about love-making!" she said tartly. "I'm not going to have anyone tell me who I can and who I can't make acquaintances with! It's my own business. Show me what else I have to do."

Vasilisa was on the point of making a sharp retort, but she checked herself on the sudden thought: "She may be a Party member for all I know!"

"Well, well!" she said with a sigh. "One has to keep one's tongue between one's teeth these days."

The pantry, a small compartment next door to the officers' saloon, communicated with the passage. Its bulkheads were lined with shelves and cupboards which had special racks to prevent breakage of the crockery in rough weather.

Vasilisa counted the plates and dishes, the glasses, spoons and saucepans, and turned them over to the new pantrywoman item by item.

Meanwhile, in the saloon, Salazkin, the third mate, had taken out the first-aid kit and was treating Borodkin. He applied iodine to the wound, saying, "An ugly cut, that. We'll have to send you to the hospital."

The sailor winced and protested, "What for? It's just a scratch. They'll laugh at me in the hospital. I'll go back to work right away."

"We'll see about that in a day or two. What were you thinking of, standing gaping under those logs?"

"I wasn't gaping at all. I saved the new pantrywoman. If I hadn't pulled her clear, it would have been all up with her. She'd have been flattened into a pancake."

The pantrywoman overheard the whole conversation. At the last words her hands shook, and she lost count.

Borodkin met her golden eyes as he passed the pantry. There was a look of sincere gratitude in them.

By dinner-time the whole crew knew that the new pantrywoman had arrived. Some went down into the sa-

loon on various pretexts, and others loitered round the galley to get a glimpse of the new woman. Some rhapsodists made much of her good looks, others, on the contrary, did not think much of her. In any event, the crew this time talked of nothing but Tatiana.

II

For over a week the winches clattered on board the ship and the men worked in the sweat of their brows. All four holds were packed with timber and the hatches battened down. Then the upper deck was used for stowage space. The steamer settled until she was brought down to her load-line. The stack of timber, supported by corner posts, rose to a level with the captain's bridge. The deckhands lashed it down, crawling about over the logs, slinging iron chains, steel lines, and hempen ropes from one side of the ship to the other. The work was supervised by the boatswain, a horsy-looking brawny Lett. Wiggling one eyebrow, he shouted, "Lash it down properly. We're going to sea, not to a bally picnic!"

Whenever there was any dirty work to do Tatiana put on grey overalls and tackled it in good earnest. Early morning would find her bustling about in the saloon while everyone else still slept. Barefooted, with tucked up sleeves, she dusted the sofa, wiped the walls, the legs of the table and the armchairs, and washed the linoleum-covered deck with soap and water. The skylight panes directly over the table were cleaned with chalk, as were also the portholes in the bulkhead looking onto the upper deck. There was not a spot she did not get at. After that she would start on the captain's and chief mate's cabins. To the surprise of their tenants, everything remained in its proper orderly place when she had finished cleaning, and not a speck of dust could be found anywhere. The plates served up in the officers' saloon were spotlessly

clean, and the cutlery shone as if it had just come from the shop. The table was laid a minute before the scheduled time, and Tatiana would make a round of the officers' cabins, knocking on the doors and saying in her clear pretty voice, "Breakfast is served."

There had been nothing like it before.

All the officers, including the captain, were amazed at her efficiency and at the fact that she herself was always neat and tidy. This immediately disposed everyone in her favour. Tatiana quickly settled down to the ship's routine and her new surroundings. She got to know every member of the ship's administration she was serving and what position he held.

She liked the captain, Nikolai Abrikosov—a vigorous upstanding man of sixty. His clean-shaven face with grey moustaches was sun-tanned and weather-beaten, and but for the web of wrinkles around his grey eyes due to a habit of narrowing them against the glare of the sea, retained a youthful freshness. He spoke quietly and calmly, but with a commanding force that had a steely quality in it. Those who worked under him were a bit afraid of him. He always prefaced his remarks to the pantrywoman with the phrase: "Tatiana, will you please..." and followed it up with an order.

The chief mate, Anatoly Glazunov, a former naval lieutenant, was an aristocratic-looking man with an aquiline nose. He never appeared in the saloon without a starched collar on. Apparently, he knew his business well—the captain trusted him—but he was careless and indolent.

Off duty he liked nothing so much as a good long sleep, from which he could only be roused with difficulty.

The chief engineer Matvei Lisukhin, an elderly experienced officer, was stingy and calculating. Whenever he sat down at the table he would produce a comb and start grooming his brown fish tail of a beard. His close-cropped narrow head was for ever preoccupied. A favourite subject

of his was coal economy, and one would think he had no interest in life outside that problem.

In addition to the officers Tatiana got to know all the crew.

She was nice to everyone without distinction, and for everyone she had a sweet smile and a shy glance of her innocent gold-tinted eyes.

Her voice in the morning when she greeted the sailors was like music: "Good morning, comrades. Lovely weather today."

"We have you to thank for that," the crew would answer good-humouredly. "It was cloudy before you came."

Tatiana would laugh, and her finely-pencilled eyebrows, tapering at the temples like the wings of a martlet, would quiver. The sea breeze got entangled in her fair wavy hair and stirred it gently. The sun tanned her exposed shoulders, neck and face. Everyone felt drawn towards her like plants straining towards the light. But so far the proximity of the town, where almost everyone had a family or a sweetheart, had been a restraining influence. The work-day over, the sailors would throw off their dirty clothes, have a wash and a brush down, and go ashore in new suits, white collars and flashy ties. The only man left on board the steamer besides the watch was seaman Borodkin, who was just dying to meet Tatiana.

"Oh, is that you, Maxim? Why don't you go ashore?" she once asked him, meeting him on the deck.

"I have no one in town," he answered gloomily.

"You must be glad to be heart-free, I suppose?"

"I'm sick of that kind of freedom."

"Then why don't you have a girl?"

His big, slightly stooping figure straightened up, and an expectant smile flitted across his brooding face.

"I haven't met the right one yet. It's got to be the real thing, for a lifetime. . . ."

He stepped up closer with such a hungry look in his

whitish glittering eyes, that she was startled and hastened to change the subject. She talked about the town and their forthcoming sea cruise. She found shipboard life delightful. Borodkin listened with but half an ear and answered her questions briefly. The hot blood was tingling in his veins. He felt tongue-tied and awkward, and that put him out still more.

On another occasion Borodkin prepared a present for her. Taking his opportunity when no one was about, he pulled a little bunch of flowers out of his pocket and thrust it at her clumsily.

Tatiana laughed not unkindly.

"You *are* a funny boy, Maxim! Is that the way to give flowers to a woman? But thank you all the same, dear."

Borodkin uttered a growly sound, and his freckled face went crimson. His eyes became moist. But he was happy.

The gall came afterwards.

Vasilisa had been watching them through the galley porthole. When he turned and walked off towards the forecastle, the servant came out and placed herself in front of him. She laughed a nasty spiteful laugh.

"Nothing doing there for you, my lad. You're just wasting your money on flowers."

Borodkin stopped, looking flustered.

"What do you mean, you port witch, you?"

"Nothing. Just giving you a hint."

He looked sternly at her sneering face and showed her an enormous fist.

"Ever tried one of these wise cracks?"

Vasilisa was not in the least put out.

"You just dare," she said defiantly. "You'll end behind iron bars for it. Fight one of your own size, you great hulking bully."

Borodkin swore and walked away.

The next day the whole crew knew that Borodkin had

presented flowers to the pantrywoman. The men chaffed him mercilessly, worst of all Brikalov.

"You've come to the wrong shop with that lovey-dovey business, my boy," the latter said. "What Tatiana needs is a handsome buck, someone she'd lose her head over. There's not much to say for the cut of your jib, now, is there? You're no oil-painting. Besides, what do you know about the barometer of a woman's heart?"

Borodkin snapped back, but he was borne down by sheer numbers. His face went the colour of beet root and he swore horribly, threatening to tear that gossip Vasilisa's long tongue out for her.

These last few days before the vessel was scheduled to sail the officers' wives became more frequent visitors aboard. They would sit round the long oval table in the saloon and Tatiana would serve them tea or dinner. She was dressed, as usual, with quiet simplicity, and this only added to her charm. The sight of the young and beautiful pantrywoman made the officers' wives uneasy on account of their husbands. They stole sidelong glances at her, biting their lips with an air of suspicious alertness, as though she were plotting to steal their little family happiness from them.

III

On a warm bright day the *Oktyabr* made ready to weigh anchor.

Everyone was excited. Men's step became more hurried. The jerky shouted commands had an impatient note in them.

In the afternoon representatives of the harbour master, the customs, the state shipowning line and a medical officer came aboard.

Through the door of the pantry Tatiana watched the papers being examined and signed in the saloon. The cus-

toms officers, accompanied by the second mate, went through the cabins and other quarters. Everything was found to be in order. The medical officer examined the crew. All were in good health. Finally the whole ship's company, with the exception of the captain, were mustered on the poop deck and lined up on the starboard side. A young man in a khaki service jacket glanced at the photograph in each man's sea card and called out his name.

The man whose name was called answered, "Present!" and crossed over to the other side.

The roll-call continued.

"Drozdova!"

"That's me," Vasilisa answered, and leisurely crossed the poop deck, waddling like a goose.

Tatiana was agog with excitement.

"Milovanova!"

"Present!" she answered with a start, making for the other side.

The man in the service jacket suddenly stopped her and examined her face closely.

"How old are you?"

Tatiana raised her eyelashes and looked up with a puzzled air.

"Turned twenty-two," she said.

The man in the service jacket hesitated, as though making up his mind what else he could ask her, then muttered, "All right."

In about an hour and a half all the formalities were completed. The port authorities took leave of the ship's officers and went ashore.

Two tugboats were already standing by, one aft, the other forward. Steel cables ran out to them from the ship. The forecastle windlass clattered, raising the black twin-fluke anchor. The *Oktyabr* began to swing round. She was towed slowly out of the harbour, steering clear of the other foreign and Russian ships that were taking on

timber. The pilot stood on the bridge, shouting orders to the tugboats through a megaphone.

Out in the bay the tugs cast off and turned back. The *Oktyabr*, with a loud hoot, like the neigh of a restive horse, got under way, breathing deep with her iron lungs. Smoke belched ever blacker and thicker from the wide funnel. The ship began picking up speed.

Tatiana stood on the poop, happy and excited. This was her first sea voyage, and everything was interesting and novel to her. The shores swept back and receded in a haze. The waters of the bay spread ever wider, utterly becalmed, lustrous with the delicious smiling hues of the sky. Below, right next to the keel, the propeller shaft droned, revolving with such force that the deck shuddered underfoot. The long wide streak of the ship's wake was like a turbulent river flowing through a golden placid plain. The home city disappeared. And there, westward, whither the *Oktyabr* was racing with her red flag fluttering in the breeze, nothing could be seen but wide luminous spaces.

"Comrade Tatiana!"

The pantrywoman looked up. Watchman Jan, a fair-haired Lett, stood on the timber stack, grinning.

"I've come after your honour," he said.

Tatiana frowned.

"What did you say?"

"The Captain wants your honour to bring him three glasses of tea and bread and butter."

She laughed heartily.

"Oh, I see! All right."

A minute or two later she was going up on the bridge with a tray.

"Thank you, my dear, thank you," the Captain said with paternal affection, twirling his grey moustache.

On her way out Tatiana looked into the wheel-house. A young German by the name of Heintz was standing at the

wheel, with an eye on the compass. The sleeves of his fine-knitted shirt were rolled up above the elbows. With his cap tilted to the back of his head and a tuft of dark hair hanging down his forehead, he looked as fine and dashing a jack-tar as ever trod a ship's deck. Strong and handsome, he seemed to be steering the vessel to some faeryland.

Tatiana descended the ladder to the timber-loaded deck, and made her way towards the galley between the engine casing and the cabins. The sailors who were off duty were standing there. She never suspected that they were purposely waiting for her there, all washed and smartened up. Brikalov was there too. Imitating the English, he shaved his face and upper lip, wore his hair brushed smooth and parted in the middle, and always had a pipe in his teeth. He considered himself irresistible with women and bore himself with an easy air of superiority.

"How d'you do, Comrade Tatiana?" he said, forestalling the others.

"Nicely, thank you," her voice rang out flute-like.

"Splendid. When we get abroad, will you allow me the pleasure of escorting you to a theatre?"

Her golden eyes twinkled.

"We shall see."

The other sailors considered Brikalov their most dangerous rival in affairs of the heart, and so they thought it just as well to bring him down a peg.

"Tatiana is quite right. Why must she go with you?"

"I'm not forcing myself on her. She can go with any lubber she likes if she gets any pleasure out of it."

Taunts flew at him from all sides.

"Oh, shut up!"

"He sticks his nose up in the air but spits on the ground."

"Oh, you shouldn't insult each other like that," Tatiana pleaded. "You are all friends."

"We were only joking, Tatiana."

Stoker Merkulov, a black, grimy big-headed young fellow resembling an African, came out of the engine room. He made a leg scrape at the pantrywoman, threw his right arm back with a flourish and said, "Long live the ship's queen, Tatiana the First!"

She laughed outright.

"Oh, what a dirty face you have!"

"I'd like to see yours after you've been shovelling coal into the furnace."

"You'd be disappointed," Tatiana said. "Your stokehold would be spick and span by the time I'd finished with it."

Merkulov began to argue, but engineman Krasnov, the ship's trade-union organizer, cut him short.

"Oh, shut off the steam!"

The stoker turned the gleaming whites of his eyes upon him.

"Who are you to lord it over me?"

Krasnov, by way of reply, tapped the stoker's dirty cap.

"A pity the neck isn't made of the same stuff as the noddle. You'd get splendid wear out of it."

Everyone laughed.

Seaman Borodkin stood a little to one side, leaning against the bulkhead of the cabin. He looked desperately blue, like a man who had lost all his money at cards.

Tatiana noticed it, and to the envy of the others, addressed him in such a sweet voice that it sent a thrill up his spine.

"Why are you keeping aloof, Maxim? Come over here. And why do you look so sad today?"

"Oh, nothing..." Borodkin muttered, shuffling his feet awkwardly.

Others volunteered the information.

"You see, the chap wants to marry, but he can't find the right girl."

"He's got one in his eye, but the trouble is his old man bungled the fireworks when he made him—turned out a damp squib."

The centre of interest suddenly shifted. Vasilisa was coming towards the galley, carrying a kettle. She wore a prim tight-lipped expression, like a lascivious Mother Superior in the presence of young nuns. She threw a scathing glance at Tatiana and turned to the cook, Petrovich, a bald, good-natured man, whose fat figure blocked the whole of the galley doorway.

"Make way, there, Admiralty ham!"

"Certainly, overripe melon!" the cook grinned, stepping aside.

The servant filled the kettle with hot water and came out again.

"Stop and have a chin-wag, Vasilisa," the sailors said.

"What do you take me for, a shameless hussy, to lounge around with you good-for-nothings?" she snapped, giving the pantrywoman another dirty look.

"Oh, of course, you're a poor innocent lamb. Tell it to someone else!" one of the men remarked.

Vasilisa spun round and retorted viciously, "When I was a girl, I used to steer a mile clear of men."

She hurried back to her cabin, followed by a genial stream of sarcasm.

"Hear that? She was a girl!"

The sailors played upon the words with roars of laughter. Tatiana took a liking to those breezy lads, who carried everything off with a careless laugh. Their sparkling eyes in bronzed faces were lusty with life and sheer daring.

In the evening a lightship was sighted. The *Oktyabr* hooted impatiently, signalling for the pilot to be taken off. The steamer came closer and brought up. The lightship's boat came alongside.

A minute later the screw blades were churning the water again.

The sun sank behind the glowing horizon. The smooth gleaming sheet of water was tinged with the glare of sunset. Tatiana, with a bowl in her hands, stopped by the main mast and filled her lungs with the moist fragrant tang of the sea, while she gazed with narrowed eyes into the luring orange-tinted distance. What lay there, beyond that rich-coloured skyline? It evoked vague dreams full of happy promise.

How good it was to set sail on a bright sunny day!

IV

The *Oktyabr* forged her way through the wilderness of sea, leaving a streaming tail of smoke behind her. Aft, under the red fluttering flag, was an apparatus called the log, which ticked off the miles the ship was making. Hundreds of them had been left behind since the ship had put out from her home port, and all were marked off on a chart that lay spread out on the table in the chart-room.

Winged time flew swiftly. Tatiana soaked in new impressions, all thrilling and joyous. Gulls wheeled, crying, round the ship. Occasionally a grampus appeared on the surface of the water, showing its bony crest, with which it ripped open the bellies of whales, striking terror into those giants of the sea. Ships met and passed. In the evening, its daily round over, the molten fiery ball of the sun would plunge into the sea across the ship's bows to emerge astern the next morning with a silent burst of light upon the azure waters. The pantrywoman took a still greater liking to the sailors. She felt happy, and seemed to grow prettier every day.

Suddenly the weather broke. A black squall pounced upon the ship like a waylaying robber, and drove up a

swarm of dark heavy clouds. The rain came down in torrents, drawing a swaying veil of watery threads across the face of the sea. Lightning staggered across the growling sky with a menacing crackle. The smooth surface of the sea heaved and surged. The steamer began to plunge across troughs and ridges.

Tatiana was under the booms at the time, in the company of the sailors. The sudden change in the sea's mood frightened her. She looked at her comrades in dismay, but they laughed her fears away.

"Wait till we get a real gale."

"Sometimes you get a snorter that'll tear a fellow's beard out by the roots."

"This wind is nothing. It's come on too sudden and will peter out soon."

As a matter of fact this sea disturbance was a mere flash in the pan. The squall dashed by with a savage uproar, shooting smut and sprays, like a drunken wedding procession. The sky cleared again. The air was becalmed. The pulsing sea, hot and blue, lay revelling in the flood of sunshine, which was strewn about like golden shavings.

The pantrywoman's amazing energy never flagged. Cleanliness and perfect order continued to be the rule of the day in her domains. The crew's interest increasingly centred around her. Away from land, the men turned romanticists. And no wonder. Tatiana possessed a peculiar trait: her golden eyes were always laughingly radiant. Whenever she looked at anyone, her eyes, against her will, held a promise of bliss. That person thought her to be more kindly disposed towards him than towards anyone else, and fondly believed that in a day or two, a week at most, she would be his. Every man secretly cherished that hope. And none suspected that she treated them all alike. That was why she was such a success.

That little woman transformed the men. Coarse man-

ners were disappearing off the ship. Bad language was used with caution, if used at all, and then only when the pantrywoman was not on deck. If she chanced to overhear any profanity, she would give the culprit a frigid look. The sailors took more care of their personal appearance, knowing that she liked cleanliness and tidiness. Even the stokers, when their watch was over, would make themselves more presentable before leaving the boiler compartment by scrubbing their bodies till they shone, putting on clean clothes and coaxing their hair into some semblance of order before a chip of mirror. When they came up on deck, they would look around on all sides, searching for the pantrywoman. A sailor would smile joyfully on meeting her, as if he had received sudden promotion.

Early one afternoon, at the bidding of the first mate, Tatiana went below to call one of the sailors.

The crew's quarters were partitioned off into two compartments by a passage and bulkheads: one for the stokers, the other for the deck-hands. The latter was occupied by several men. The place was dirty. Fag-ends and breadcrumbs littered the table. The beds were not made. The pantrywoman did not mince words.

"You live like pigs!" she said. "Is it so hard to tidy up after yourselves?"

The men began making excuses.

"We had no time. If you're not standing watch, you're busy doing something else. . . ."

"Don't tell me that," Tatiana interrupted. "I could keep this place clean all by myself, and look how many of you there are. It wouldn't take more than five minutes to make everything spick and span. I'll tidy it up for you if you want, this very minute!"

"We wouldn't think of it, Tatiana. Goodness, no! Come again this evening. You'll see what we've done then."

"All right, I will."

After telling one of the sailors to go and see the navi-

gating officer, the pantrywoman looked in on the stokers. Two men were sitting at a table, playing draughts, and three were sleeping in their bunks.

"Good morning, comrades! I want to see how you live."

"Come right in, admission is free for you."

Here, too, her bell-like voice rang with indignation.

"It's dirtier here than the sailors' place! Boots and socks lying about on the floor. Haven't you anywhere to put them? And look how dirty that kettle of yours is! The white mugs have turned brown. What I can't make out is how you can keep yourselves tidy and yet live in such a pigsty."

The stokers were embarrassed. A sleepy grinning face was thrust out from under a blanket on one of the bunks, and a hoarse voice started protesting.

"That isn't fair of you, Tatiana. Try and put yourself in our place. We're not serving at an altar, you know. All you do there's just mill around swinging a censer. No dirt there. But we're the Black Gang, messing about with coal, we are."

"All the same, it's no excuse."

"Why don't you take a seat, Tatiana, and have a little chat with us? There's nothing I like more than a good chin-wag with a clever woman."

"I've no time. Got to lay the table. I'll drop in some other time."

She turned away and went out.

Vasilisa had once enjoyed a certain amount of attention on the part of the crew, but now everyone shunned her and made fun of her. That slip of a girl stood in her light, made her life a misery. She hated Tatiana, although she treated her with mock kindliness whenever she met her.

"Still at it, my sweet? What a busy little body you are, always on your toes. But no matter how hard you try, you'll never jump higher than what you are."

"I know. But you can't live without working."

"That's true enough. But you've got to know the right measure. You know the saying—work loves a fool."

"A lazy-bones invented that saying."

Vasilisa's lip curled.

"I don't know about who invented it, but I do know that work kills horses. The way I look at it, the only good time we girls can have is when we're single. That's when you have all the freedom, and honour, and are treated civil. You'll have cares enough and to spare when you get married. That's how it is."

And she would slowly sail away, waddling from side to side.

After dinner Vasilisa went below. Both crew's quarters were a scene of great activity. The sailors, their trousers and sleeves rolled up, were hard at it—one scouring the kettle, another washing the mugs, a third painting the deckhead with enamel paint.

"Spring-cleaning, I see!" Vasilisa said maliciously, standing in the doorway.

"Call it what you like," the men answered in a none too friendly tone.

"Tidying up?"

"Yes. Better than poking around the ship like a greasy pig."

The shot went home, and Vasilisa's fat chin quivered with indignation.

"There's no holiday tomorrow according to the church calendar, as far as I remember."

"We don't live by the church calendar. It's you who still carry on the old way—praying to God and hob-nobbing with the devil."

She shook her head reproachfully.

"I don't know what's come over you men lately. You've all gone crazy, really you have."

"What d'you mean?"

"It's simply a disgrace—that's what I mean! You've got scrambled eggs in your heads instead of brains. All mad on brushing and scrubbing and shaving and cleaning! All laying yourselves out to go one better than the other. And why? Because of that chit! I could understand if she was anything decent to look at. But she's just a broom-stick! You couldn't get a handful of her if you tried...."

"Shut your dirty jaw, you hell-cat, you!" the seamen started shouting.

"Couldn't get a handful, you say! The way you talk, a cow or a mare beats you hollow when it comes to looks, because they're all guts and garbage."

"She only says that because she's envious, boys."

The men tried to cover up their embarrassment with laughter.

"What, me envy her!" Vasilisa shouted. "Why, I've seen fellows in my day you're not fit to hold a candle to. Who d'you think you are? Pshaw! It's enough to make a cat laugh!"

Never before, when leaving the sailors, had she scrambled up the ladder with such agility.

V

In the evening, her duties finished, Tatiana decided to go below to the crew's quarters. The afterglow of sunset was fading and night deepening when she came up on deck. Approaching the forecastle, she suddenly heard voices from the crew's space coming up through the ventilator cowl. Her name was mentioned. Involuntarily she drew nearer, pricking up her ears. The voice was Brikalov's.

"I just have to take a fancy to a girl and she's as good as mine. A woman's heart is an open book to me. If you keep pestering her with your love, it's ten to one she'll

give you the bird. The thing is to let her see how she inspires you and how you feel like moving mountains when you're with her. Women are crazy about inspiring us fellows. And then you ease up a bit, pretend you don't care. Better still if you start getting off with another one. That'll bring things to a head right away. If she swallows the bait, that's where your chance comes to land her. She's yours for the taking. Going about it the way Borodkin does is like trying to catch the wind with a bare mast."

Tatiana bit her lip.

"Very well," she said to herself. "I'll remember that."

A sound of laughter came up the ventilator, then someone said in a sceptical tone, "You can spin a long yarn, all right, Brikalov, but let's see you do it."

"I've done it already."

"No one's seen it."

"You'll see it soon."

"Mind you don't burn yourself, Brikalov!"

Tatiana was about to turn back, but she thought better of it and descended the ladder with an air of decision.

The seamen jumped up and greeted her with boisterous cheers and an invitation to join them at the table.

Brikalov came bouncing up with the smile of a boulevardier and rattled off a rehearsed little speech.

"I greet you, our dear Tatiana, from the bottom of a warm and separate heart! You are our sea-nymph! Your eyes raise in me a hurricane of lofty feelings."

Tatiana glanced at him coldly.

"I can't stand clowning."

The lady-killer wilted at once and mumbled something amid general laughter.

Borodkin's eyes danced with joy.

"You look very happy tonight, Maxim," Tatiana said to him.

"We're going on a foreign cruise, that's why," he answered.

Tatiana was treated to tea with biscuits and sweets.

"Where did you get these sweets?" she asked.

"For you we'd get things from the bottom of the sea."

The lower deck was completely transformed. Everything was tidy, the deck was scrubbed clean, and there was not a single stain on the oilcloth. The white deckhead smelt of fresh paint. In the light of the electric lamp the big copper kettle glowed like the westering sun. And the men themselves, shaved, washed and dressed up in clean clothes, looked as if they had got themselves up for parade.

"There, see how nice it is now!" Tatiana said, looking round the compartment with a glance of approval.

"It's always been like this," the men said, trying to justify themselves in her eyes. "It was just an oversight that time—you know how it is when one man leaves it to another."

One-third of the crew was running the ship. Those who were off duty were almost all below deck. The stokers and enginemen, and even the carpenter and the boatswain were there too. The little woman was the centre of a gay eddy. The men's voices grew vibrant. Often the sound of talk was drowned in bursts of laughter. Each vied with the other, eager to show off in front of the pantrywoman, while at the same time belittling his rivals.

Artamon Khilkov, the middle-aged carpenter, who was habitually a taciturn man, now talked more than anyone else. He told funny stories, which he passed off as facts. His broad face with its high cheek-bones crinkled up into cunning little grimaces, and he stuck his elbows out like a bird spreading its wings for flight.

"Listen to this one. I was still serving in the Navy at that time. After dinner, the cook, as usual, swilled his pots and poured the slops out into a pail. He takes

the pail and goes out into the yard. And what should he see but the admiral himself rolling up to the gates of the naval depot in a posh cab. 'Hi, you!' the admiral yells to him. 'What's that you got there?' The cook was so scared, he didn't know what to say for the minute. Then he blurts out, "It's what's left over from dinner, sir.' 'Ah,' says the admiral, 'give me a spoon. Let's see what kind of food the men get.' The cook gives him a spoon. The admiral swallowed a mouthful and pulled a face. He swallowed another, and pulled a still sourer one. 'Ugh, what beastly stuff!' he says. 'Absolutely no salt in it. It isn't soup, it's slops, filthy slops!' And the cook goes and blurts out, 'That's right, sir, that's just what it is—slops. I was going to throw it out in the dustbin.' Did the admiral kick up rough! He roared and went as blue in the face as a ripe egg-plant, then all of a sudden he flops down, dead as a doornail. They said afterwards his heart burst to smithereens, like it was dynamited. . . ."

Tatiana's laugh was the heartiest of all. The charm of youth sparkled in her cheeks and went to the men's heads like wine. All eyes were turned eagerly upon her. Every man felt as if he had more blood in him, as if his muscles had grown stronger.

Piqued by the carpenter's success, the engineman remarked slightingly, "If it wasn't for one little thing, women would be likely to fall in love with Khilkov."

"What thing is that?" asked the carpenter.

"You're too old. You're just waste steam, old chap."

"The trouble with you is your tongue runs before your wit," the carpenter retorted. "Any fool knows that old wine is always the strongest."

Stoker Perekatov appeared in the doorway with an accordion. The handsome oval of his face with its natty moustache wore a proud grin.

All heads were turned in his direction.

"Come on, Boris, let's have a tune, something to stir up all the living creatures at the bottom of the sea."

The stoker sat down on a bench and pulled his cap down over his eyes. He threw a mischievous glance at Tatiana as he stretched the patterned bellows of his instrument and ran his fingers over the keys. Gay sparkling music burst upon the air. One of the seamen clapped his hands and shouted, "Well, who's going to partner me?"

Arms akimbo, he tripped round the widened circle with mincing steps. Another seaman joined him, marking time to the music with shuffling feet. They danced themselves off their feet, their faces growing as red as beetroots.

When the dance was over, the stoker struck up a song:

Oh, these silly eyes of mine,
What the dickens do they think?
When they see my darling girl,
They themselves begin to blink.

His soft tenor voice mingling with the sounds of the accordion thrilled Tatiana and held her spellbound. She had eyes now only for Perekatov. A dreamy smile hovered about her lips.

Borodkin was watching her. His luck was slipping from him, vanishing behind a cloud like a silvery moon. He felt a sinking of the heart. The song came to an end. He had been waiting for that moment, and when it came, he let fall with an air of studied calmness, "Splendid, bakehead! But why do you wear your cap over your eyes?"

Jestingly, as it were, he tipped the cap back over the stoker's head.

The stoker had a swelling on his forehead over his left eyebrow, a red, shiny bump the size of a walnut. He had taken great pains to conceal it from Tatiana, and now she had seen the repulsive thing.

Perekatov jumped up like a madman.

"What's the idea, you ginger monkey? What d'you think I am, a plaything?"

He all but threw his accordion down on the table.

Borodkin's brows came together sternly.

"What's the matter with you? Can't you take a joke?"

"For a joke like that I'll leave you only two teeth to nibble sugar with!"

"Easy over the pimples there if you don't want your jaw bashed!"

They both stood in a fighting attitude, measuring each other with their eyes.

The others egged them on.

Tatiana stepped between the two rivals.

"Sit down! Come on! Sit down, I tell you! If you don't, I'll never come here again."

The stoker could not play any more. He went back to his compartment.

Tatiana took her leave too.

She lingered on the poop before going down to her cabin. It was a clear starlit night. The sea lay hushed, as if listening to the mute throbbing song of the sky. The only sound that disturbed the stillness was that of the *Oktyabr* ploughing the dark surface of the sea. It was strange to think that from out there, beyond the horizon, a new and unknown land would soon appear. Two men were strolling about on the starboard wing of the bridge. They were the watch. From time to time they trained their binoculars in the same direction. Presently Tatiana made out two stars sailing towards their ship—a white one, and beneath it a green one. Then came the voice of the second mate:

"A German tramp running hard for Russian corn. They can't do without us."

VI

After dinner the third mate lay down in his small cabin for a nap. Like all seamen, he dozed off quickly, but was immediately roused by a tap on the door.

"Come in!" he cried.

The door opened, and stoker Perekatov stepped in. He looked so upset that one would think God knows what calamity had happened to the ship.

"I want to ask you a favour, Comrade Glazunov," he said.

"What is it?"

The stoker pulled his cap off and pointed to his bump.

"Do you see this beastly thing?" he said.

The mate sat up in his bunk.

"Yes. What of it?"

"Cut the damn thing out! I can't go about with it any more."

"Why not?"

The stoker was at a loss for words.

"It's in my way," he said at length.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that—it's in my way."

Officer Glazunov opened his eyes wider.

"Something is wrong with your head, Comrade Perekatov. Has anyone given you a whack over it today by any chance?"

"I'm not joking," the stoker said earnestly. "I'm asking you seriously—please do me a favour."

"Go and see a doctor when we come into port. I'm not a surgeon."

"I'm not asking you to operate on my liver, but just to cut out this bump. You don't have to be a surgeon to do that."

But the mate was adamant.

The stoker went out, slamming the door.

He hunted out Artamon Khilkov, the carpenter, and went into his cabin with him.

"Would you like a bottle of brandy? Or something else at your own choice?"

The carpenter eyed him incredulously.

"What's the idea?" he said.

"If one isn't enough, I'll stand you two in the first port we call at."

"But what for?"

"For a five-minute job."

"Let's hear the rest."

The stoker pointed to his forehead and said agitatedly, "Be a pal, Artamon, cut out this damned bump for me."

The carpenter shook his head.

"This is a serious thing. I'm afraid I haven't got the knack for it."

"Nonsense! You're a master craftsman, aren't you! You've got the skill. If you can make wardrobes, you can tackle this bump easy as anything. It's just the same as planing down a knot in a board."

Khilkov was flattered by the praise.

"Won't I be held responsible in case of anything?" he said with a grin.

"Why, I'd sooner die than let a fellow down."

"Two bottles of brandy, you say?"

"As true as I live! You know me, I'm as good as my word."

"All right."

Boiling water was brought, and a sharp razor placed in it. Strips of clean linen were laid out. The carpenter got himself ready for the operation by rolling up his sleeves and washing his hands. The stoker lay down on the bunk.

"When you cut it, don't forget to dress the skin a bit, otherwise you won't be able to sew it up."

"Don't you worry, pal. I'll make a first-class job of it. Any professor will envy it."

When the edge of the razor touched the living flesh, Perekatov bared his clenched teeth. A cold sweat broke out over his body, and the blood trickled down his pale clammy face and got into his eyes. He shut them tight. The operation lasted a long time. It seemed as if the cold blade was cutting through the frontal bone and had reached the brain. A sharp pain shot through all the stoker's nerves.... He felt a sickening gripping sensation at the pit of his stomach, as though he had swallowed some poison. Mustering all his strength, he lay without stirring, silent as a log. He cheered himself with the thought that no one now would dare to make fun of him, and he would have no need, when meeting a woman, to pull his cap down low over his eyes to hide the repulsive swelling.

Finishing the operation, the carpenter seized the bump, which he had cut all round, and gave it such a violent pull that the stoker's head flew up with a jerk.

Perekatov leapt to his feet, swaying like a drunken man.

"That's finished, pal," said the carpenter. "The main thing is done. As for patching up the wound, any measly ship's mate can do that."

The next day the *Oktyabr* dropped anchor in a German port. The chief engineer wanted certain things bought for the engine room, and that would mean a day's delay.

Some of the crew were given leave to go ashore.

Meeting Tatiana in the saloon, Captain Abrikosov asked her, "Why aren't you taking a spell ashore?"

"Thank you, Captain. I'd like to see how these Germans live."

"Have you any money?"

"I haven't earned any yet."

"Oh, that can be mended."

The Captain turned to the chief mate, who acted as the ship's purser.

"Advance Tatiana a month's pay, will you," he said.

The pantrywoman was escorted by Heintz and Borodkin. The first thing that struck her was the great number of ships in the harbour. There were vessels here from all parts of the world. Some were filling their capacious holds with German goods, others were unloading. Voices in a multitude of languages were drowned in the clang of iron, the roar and rattle of trains and carts, and the wail of sirens and whistles. There were beggars at every step. This hungry mob of men and women, young and old, swarmed up every ship, begging bread or money from the seamen.

"There was nothing like this here before the war," Heintz told Tatiana. "Lots of people are having a hell of a time now."

After the deserted sea, the town was more exciting than ever. Life seemed an extraordinarily noisy and bustling affair. The trams hummed and motor-cars growled in a variety of keys as they raced madly onward. The crowds on the pavements were like a rushing torrent. Tatiana had an odd feeling; she could scarcely believe that not so long ago the Russians and Germans had been engaged in such a fierce and cruel fight, and that one could now walk among one's former enemies without experiencing the slightest fear. And when they went into the splendid shops with their gleaming plate-glass windows, the salesmen who served her smiled so pleasantly.

They went into a restaurant too. Her squires vied with each other in treating her. The advantage was all on the side of Heintz, however. Being a German, he talked freely with his countrymen and told Tatiana all about their lives. Borodkin was in a ridiculous position. He

had a single trump card though—the fact that he was a bachelor—and he decided to play it.

"You're having a good time here, Comrade Heintz, listening to music—beer and pastries on the table—while your family is struggling for a living, I daresay."

"My family, what do you mean?" Heintz said, taken aback.

"I mean the family you've got written down in your papers—your wife and children."

Tatiana pricked up her ears.

Heintz scowled at his comrade.

"Keep your lectures for long-eared asses! When I want your advice, I'll ask for it."

"You're not angry, are you? It's only true."

"Some truths are about as welcome as a flea in the forecastle."

"You are such nice boys," Tatiana laughed, "but you're always jumping down each other's throat. Anyone would think you were enemies. I want you to be nice and jolly."

She slapped the hand of one, then the other. The two seamen smiled.

They got back to the ship late in the evening.

Tatiana put on the new things she had bought, then went into the saloon. Most of the ship's officers were sitting at the table, having tea. Vasilisa, who was serving them, had a sullen vinegary expression, as if she had a mouthful of nasty medicine she was afraid to swallow.

"Good evening, comrades!"

Everyone looked round. An audible gasp went up. There in the doorway stood the pantrywoman, but it was not the former simple pantrywoman with the red headscarf they had all known. She was wearing a low-necked dress with short sleeves, pale-blue like the colour of a tropical sea. Her golden eyes sparkled joyously from

under the wide brim of a hat trimmed with forget-me-nots.

"Why, Tatiana Petrovna, I wouldn't know you!" said the chief engineer, calling her for the first time by her name and patronymic.

The third mate, the youngest of the company, jumped up and exclaimed, "Can this be our esteemed Tatiana Petrovna? I can't believe my eyes!"

Praise and admiration for the pantrywoman's smart new clothes were loud and profuse, and all except the Captain called her by her name and patronymic.

The saloon was filled with jubilant noise.

Vasilisa was the only glum exception.

"She looks like a bourgeois," she snorted. "I don't see what there is to make such a fuss about. It's none of my business, though. I've done duty for you, by the way."

She went up the ladder, hissing, "These have gone woman-mad too."

The pantrywoman was invited to the table and treated with biscuits and fruit.

The sailors started coming down into the saloon on one pretext or another. To prolong their visit they asked the staff all kinds of silly questions. Maxim Borodkin came down, dressed in a grey suit—a recent purchase. He threw a long soulful look at Tatiana and addressed himself to Salazkin.

"I've come for some medicine, Comrade Salazkin," he said.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I feel sort of queer," Borodkin answered, reddening. He was a bad liar.

He took some medicine drops with water, started choking and coughing, and rushed out like a scalded cat.

The sailors standing round the galley were very pleased when the pantrywoman joined them there. Some of

them were slightly tipsy, but made an effort to appear sober. They all started speaking to her at once.

Khilkov, the carpenter, came up, lurching.

"Ah, Tatiana! The pride and glory of our *Oktyabr*!"

"What are you wobbling about for?" Tatiana asked him.

"Sorry, had a drop in the eye, you know.... But I've still got my wits about me," Khilkov said. Raising his fist with a threatening gesture, he went on, "I'm telling all of you, my friends, that if anyone wrongs our little swallow bird, I won't give him more than a minute to live. There! Just one minute to say his prayers. Then I'll start killing him by inches. Savvy?"

The sailors laughed and humoured him.

"You're the man for it all right. Naturally, being a surgeon."

"By the way, how is your patient, Comrade Khilkov?" Tatiana asked.

"Fine. That operation I made on Perekatov was a good job of work. His cheek has swelled up a bit and one eye's shut, but that's nothing. That assistant of mine, the ship's mate, must have used the wrong medicine to paint his wound with. The Germans will complete the cure for him now."

"The Germans?"

"Yes. Perekatov's been sent to the hospital. He started running a high temperature."

The jolly accordion-player was much in Tatiana's thoughts that evening.

VII

The *Oktyabr* was under way again, ploughing the leaden waters of the North Sea. A light southeaster had sprung up. Brilliant white clouds flecked the blue sky like spillings of cream. Torrents of sunshine warmed the bodies and souls of the seamen with their beneficent heat.

The pantrywoman came up onto the poop several times to gaze at the immensity of the outspread sea. A long, straight, spumous track ran out astern and lost itself in the distance. The horizon was flung wide back. Tatiana looked at the sea through screwed-up eyes, and the sea, forgetting to brood, looked at Tatiana out of a web of shining wrinkles. They were smiling at each other.

In the evening, after tea, the pipe blew and the command was given from the bridge to go below for the general meeting.

Never had the men gathered in the saloon with such alacrity. The place was crowded. Some sat at the table, others were obliged to stand. Engineman Ryabinkin was in the chair. He kept raising his hands and rumpling his thick black hair with outspread stumpy fingers. Brikalov took the minutes. He sat puffing at his pipe, looking down at everyone with lofty toleration. The second engineer, a thick-lipped, clean-shaven man with gentle calfish eyes, was making a report on the international situation. The men paid but scant attention to him. They were interested in the pantrywoman. She was sitting at the table between the second mate and the W. T.-man, who was cautiously pressing up against her. Everyone noticed that his habitual gloomy look had vanished from his face, and when he stole a glance at his neighbour's bosom, the nostrils of his broad flat nose quivered. Vasilisa was there too. She stood leaning against the bulkhead, and hatred smouldered in her eyes as she watched the men exchanging playful glances with Tatiana like a merry game of tossfire.

"Shall we discuss the report?" the chairman asked, when the speaker had finished.

The sailors stirred.

"It's clear enough."

"Just make a note of it, that's all."

The next question was that of the caterer of the mess.

The man who now filled that post could only speak his Penza dialect, and was unsuitable on a foreign cruise. Heintz was elected.

Brikalov got up and, taking the pipe out of his mouth, asked for the floor.

"Go ahead," the chairman said with a smile.

"I don't like jawing, comrades, so I'll be short. You all know that since we've wriggled out of the capitalist yoke we've got to run the country ourselves. To do that we've got to buy more literature and read more. A book is to the brain what a hone is to a razor—it sharpens your wits. So I move that we deduct a ruble from our pay for the library instead of the fifty kopeks we are now giving. What do you think about it?"

Tatiana looked at Brikalov and nodded approval.

Immediately there was a general uproar in favour of the motion.

"Hear, hear!"

"We've lived long enough like blind moles!"

One of the stokers, shouting all the others down, moved, "Make it a ruble fifty a man!"

Tatiana awarded him with a smile.

Borodkin was not to be outdone. He pushed his way forward, and, reddening as though lifting a heavy weight, he blurted out, "Two rubles each!"

"Hey, hold on!" Vasilisa started protesting. "Have you all gone crazy or what! You'll be giving up all your pay in a minute. Why should I have to suffer?"

"I haven't given you the floor, Comrade Vasilisa," the chairman remarked. "So will you please pipe down."

"Why should I? I'm not wearing your skirt, am I?"

Borodkin was highly pleased when his amendment was adopted.

The chairman rumpled his hair vigorously and said, "I want to say a few words. Once we've started talking about the library, I think it's time we improved the tech-

nique too. Our librarian is often busy. When he should be giving out books, you'll find him standing the watch. I move that we should elect a new librarian." The chairman paused, glanced at the pantrywoman, and resumed, "D'you know who?"

"Tatiana!" several voices sang out in a chorus.

"That's it, a northeaster in your back!" the chairman said approvingly. "Have we your consent, Tatiana?"

The pantrywoman was thrown into confusion.

"I don't mind. But will I be able to do it?"

"Nonsense! Of course you will. Up with your paws, boys!"

All hands flew up. Then came a round of cheers.

Vasilisa turned away from the table. The veins stood out thickly at her temples.

Abrikosov, who was sitting at the bottom of the table, watched the proceedings with a quizzical look. The old captain understood everything, for had he not been young himself once?

"Any other questions?" the chairman asked.

"I have a proposal," said the Lett Jan.

"Out with it, boy, we're all ears."

"We're conscious citizens now, and it's time we put a stop to swearing. The man who swears is to be fined a ruble. The money will go to the library."

"No one here uses bad language, it seems to me," the chairman remarked.

"Of course not," said the sailors. "Still, put it to the vote just for conscience' sake, you know."

Vasilisa knew for whose sake that proposal was made.

"Why, you're all crazy!" she cried vehemently. "What next will you be thinking up! Swearing is like the very air you breathe, you couldn't live without it. Take the bos'un for that matter. Can you see him laying off it? Why, if you put him into a coffin he'd still spout sailor's blessings from it."

His sparse moustache twitching, the boatswain glanced at Vasilisa out of the tail of his eye, then shifted his glance to Tatiana, and upon meeting her eyes, lowered his head with a hopeless gesture.

The carpenter stood up for him.

"You needn't worry about him, Vasilisa. The bos'un will toe the line as good as the next man. If it comes to that, he can go down into the forepeak or some other place—there are plenty of quiet nooks about the ship—and let out religion in private as much as he wants. When he's eased his mind, he can come aloft again."

Laughter greeted this speech.

The motion was adopted almost unanimously.

That evening Vasilisa sat for a long time in her cabin, biting her lips. The pantrywoman's success with the men was growing sensationally from day to day. The ship's officers now as well as the crew were beginning to go crazy over the girl. Fate was serving Vasilisa shabbily, and she felt she was being hardly used. Many of the men went out of their way to show their contempt for her for fear that Tatiana might suspect them of harbouring gentler feelings. And so it would go on until one of the many who were hungering for young love had got her for his own. Following this line of argument, that worldly wise woman, Vasilisa, came to the conclusion that this crowning event had to be precipitated. But how? Rage and hatred almost choked her. She was prepared to go all lengths to take her revenge upon the woman who had dropped the poison of bitter jealousy into her heart. A dumb anger swelled in her bosom as she sat planning how to crush her rival.

Glancing at herself in the mirror, she saw a face with inflamed eyes and quivering chin transfigured by mental anguish. She turned away from the mirror with hatred in her heart and went out of the cabin. It was past midnight. Borodkin had the deck. Waiting until his watchmates

were out of earshot, Vasilisa called him to the mainmast, where they could not be overheard. Leaning against the timber stack, she whispered, "Look here, my lad, do you want to get Tatiana?"

"What do you mean?" Borodkin said, surprised.

"Don't beat about the bush, man. I know everything. Tell me straight. I'll help you."

"How?"

"That's none of your business. If you don't get her, someone else will, and you'll just lick your chops like a cat over a bowl of cream."

Borodkin winced. His voice was husky with excitement when he asked again, "Why?"

"Because you've got sprouts under the nose with nothing sown in the head."

She began to give him instructions in an excited whisper.

The stars twinkled serenely among the scattered clouds, remote from the world's cares. A waning moon, rising slowly, hung over the horizon like the rind of a ripe yellow melon. The silvery sea lay hushed and still, save where its ripple broke around the hull of the moving steamer with a fretful murmur.

"Is it all clear?" Vasilisa said.

"Yes," Borodkin answered curtly.

"Mind you do everything exactly as I told you."

They parted. He went back to the bridge, she to her cabin.

VIII

The library was housed in a small cabin in the forecastle. The first thing the pantrywoman did when she took over was to tidy the place up. She wiped the shelves and bulkheads with a damp cloth and washed the floor. She went through all the books and arranged them by subjects, then drew up a new catalogue.

The sailors, among themselves, said of her:

"She's smart all right!"

"Does twenty jobs at once."

"Yes, she's a top-notcher."

Or one of them would voice a cherished thought:

"She'll make a jewel of a wife! Lucky man that gets her."

The happiest time for the seamen was the dog-watch, between six and eight in the evening. They were the hours in which books were given out. The men, all spruce and clean, would queue up outside the library before it opened.

"Good evening, everybody," Tatiana would say, coming down the passage.

"Same to you, and many of 'em," the sailors would answer cheerily.

She would receive them in the library one at a time. Some asked for definite books, naming the author and the title, while others did not know what book to take.

"Well, what will you have?"

"Oh, anything so long as it grips you."

"There are books on social sciences, natural history. Or would you prefer fiction?"

"I want a book to enlarge the mind."

Tatiana would laugh, her cheeks warm with blushes, and the sailors would laugh with her.

Carpenter Khilkov, receiving a fat volume of Nekrasov, said, "I'd like to keep this a bit longer if I may, Tatiana."

"Do you like Nekrasov?"

"He had a good head for poetry, that chap. I dabble a bit in that line myself. Poetry is my craze."

Tatiana was surprised to hear it.

"Is that so! And does anything come of it?"

"Not half as good as Nekrasov. When I read him, I feel I could cry. Sometimes he sears your heart like a hot flame. But my stuff is a wash-out."

"You ought to read more of the modern poets, Khilkov," one of the sailors advised him.

"Yes, the poets these days have more pep, only you can't make head or tail of them. Sometimes you read one of those fellows and wonder—can the chap be in his right mind? I could dash off verses like that at the rate of a yard a day."

The carpenter struck a pose, shook his fists, and bellowed:

The sky's a blue cow,
The sun a golden udder,
The sea a leaden milk-pail....

The library provided no little diversion in the ship's routine.

Afterwards it came out that Tatiana herself was fond of books and was more kindly disposed towards those who read a lot. For them she had a softer voice, a sweeter smile. Often she had been heard to declare, "I love well-read people. They're so much more interesting to talk to."

No other steamer afloat resembled the *Oktyabr*, every member of whose crew went about with a book. Men read whenever they had a minute to spare. Bent on outshining all the others, Brikalov introduced a new fashion at the very start by discussing the last book he had read with the librarian. And everyone noticed that it pleased her. That beau ideal was a rival by no means to be despised, and the result was that everyone else followed his example. It meant wading through a book from cover to cover. Some of the men went without sleep for nights at a stretch. The worst to suffer was Borodkin, who was determined at all costs to excel his comrades in intellectual parts. He got splitting headache for his pains, and his face grew pinched.

Vasilisa sauntered about the ship, saying, "Reading, brothers?"

"Your brothers are prowling about in the woods in grey coats."

But she controlled her temper—so sure was she of the pantrywoman's speedy downfall.

"Studying to be professors, or what?"

"Go one higher."

"What rank is higher than a professor's I'd like to know?"

"What can you know with that bird's brain of yours?"

"You fellows look like real pippins: you're got up to kill, your hair's tidy, your boots are polished, and you've even got neckties on. Regular tin-pot intellectuals. The only trouble is your mugs spoil the picture."

Maxim Borodkin remarked in private to Tatiana in a casual sort of way, "It's a shame the way our boys jeer at Vasilisa."

"But she always starts it first," Tatiana protested. "I think she's a very spiteful woman."

"You're wrong. Vasilisa is a good honest soul. Her trouble is she's never had a real chance in life."

"What's the matter with her?"

"She was brought up in a strange family. Her first husband was killed. He was a stevedore. Crushed to death in a ship's hold. A load of iron dropped on him. She ran away from her second husband. He was a drunkard, and used to beat her black and blue every day."

Tatiana felt uncomfortable and dropped her eyes.

"H'm. I had quite a different opinion of her."

"And she's mistaken in you too. She thinks you a proud woman."

"Who, me a proud woman!" Tatiana exclaimed, throwing up her hands. "What an idea!"

After that conversation Tatiana was kinder to Vasilisa. The latter, for her part, went out of her way to make friends with the young woman and win her confidence.

The *Oktyabr* ran into a fog-bank. It was as if a grey

cloud had dropped upon the surface of the sea. The horizon was hidden, and the sun had vanished. At times those on the bridge could not see the men standing on the foredeck. The steamer groped her way like a blind bull, every minute sending out a protracted bellow. Other ships answered her with a wail out of the shaggy murk. It sounded like sea monsters calling to each other, now approaching, now receding behind the thick veil of fog.

The off-duty watch gathered round the galley. The pantrywoman was there too. Although they laughed and joked, their eyes were anxious and watchful. The viscid fog clung to all objects and swathed everyone in dampness. And although the men knew there was not a single rock around, they felt more disturbed than during a stiff breeze.

"This fog's nothing to the one I once got caught in," came the muffled voice of one of the seamen. "You held your arm out in front of you and couldn't see your hand. Our skipper was a regular devil for giving a ship the gun. He drove her at full speed, and would enter a harbour hand over fist. He had a sixth sense, like a beast."

Tatiana listened to the sailors' talk with great interest, now going into peals of laughter, now wide-eyed with fear whenever the stories dealt with shipwreck or drowning. Everyone had something to say and was eager to tell it to the young woman, knowing that she liked it.

The carpenter, his eyes alone smiling in a grave face, had his yarn too.

"We had an interesting adventure once. I was serving in a gaff schooner—the *Daisy* her name was. She was such an old tub that the Soviet government didn't bother to nationalize her. She remained the property of the shipmaster. That shipmaster, by the way, did wonders on her. He was a good fisherman and ran the schooner himself as skipper. When it came to fishing, he'd beat everyone hollow. And as for seamanship, I haven't met his equal yet. Not even the Flood could stop him from going out

to sea. He was as game as they make 'em. Thrifty too—liked everything to be shipshape in his schooner. Never a kopek went waste. He even kept a pig on board so's to use up the mess leavings and fish guts. Now, one day, when we were going to put out to sea, a man comes along and says to the master, 'Will you take me along, skipper,' he says. 'I'll just work for my keep.' We looked at him—he was dirty and ragged. Had long thin fingers. A pinched careworn face. Eyes full of misery and despair. The master says, 'Can you work?' 'I'll get used to it,' he answers. 'All right,' the master says, 'I'll pay you in fish.' 'I don't care what you pay me,' the man says. So we took him along. Went out to sea. There was fish galore that time. Every mesh had a fish in it each time we pulled the net in. Had no time to get a breather, what with clearing the nets, and handling and salting the fish. We dumped them straight in the hold. Our new fisherman's name was Arnold. But we called him by his name and patronymic Arnold Nikolayevich. He had a pretty bad time of it—flabby muscles, you know. But I will say this for him—he tried his level best, honestly. We sized him up after a while. Plainly, he wasn't one of us. Educated man. Knew everything under the sun. When he'd start to talk, we'd all hang on his lips. The only thing he didn't have was the knack for work. The master would swear at him till he was blue in the face. Afterwards, when we got friendly with him, Arnold Nikolayevich owned up that he was of the gentry. Had an estate of his own before the Revolution. Served as an officer. Well, you know, the Revolution plucked him like a hawk a fowl, and kicked him out. Found himself sort of stranded. Couldn't get a job anywhere. Had such a hell of a time that he wanted to commit suicide. And here we turned up, and he tacked on to us."

The carpenter made a slight pause, passed his eye over his audience, and went on.

"Everything went well till the gale came on. Christ, you should have seen it! Our schooner bounced about on the waves like a rubber ball. Sometimes the whole upper deck was under water. Luckily we had taken in the sails in time, otherwise they'd have been torn to rags. And off we were rushed, the devil knows where! Arnold Nikolayevich was in a blue funk. You'd think each running sea was a tiger with bared fangs, the way he shied at it. He trembled like a lost puppy, and kept whimpering, 'Skipper, we're lost! Make for the shore, quick! I want to get on land!' The skipper had a well-fed mug the colour of brick, with a wide mouth covered with gingery hair, and a fleshy nose like a ripe tomato sticking out of it. 'Shut up, you jelly-fish!' he roared at Arnold. 'Another word and I'll throw you overboard!' Our new fisherman went blue around the gills and lost the use of his tongue from terror. We dragged him below. Funny thing life is: here's a fellow who nearly committed suicide, and, would you believe it, he gets scared worse than any of us. Well, anyway, the next day the gale let go. The *Daisy* was none the worse for her experience. All that was left of the gale was a swell. The schooner rocked on it like a cradle. But a fog crept up—thicker than the one we're having now. Couldn't see a darned thing. And just as luck would have it we'd lost our fog-horn the day before. All round us trawlers and motor schooners were hooting away, sometimes right next to you. At any moment one of 'em was likely to sail smack into us. It would be good-bye then. Something had to be done to avoid a collision, but what? Our skipper didn't rack his brains long. He got out a wooden box and made a hole in one side of it. Then he put the pig in it with its tail sticking out of the hole, and says to Arnold Nikolayevich, 'We've got no means of signalling. Any ship is likely to cut us in halves. So you pull away at the pig's tail. That'll make a hog-in-the-fog noise as good as any horn.' It was enough to make a fellow cry,

especially when he's an ex-gentleman. Humiliating, you know. But you couldn't very well disobey the skipper, could you? Besides, with death lurking all round you, there was no time for arguing. So our new fisherman just went to work as best he could. That pig screeched like it was being murdered. You could hear it two miles away. To look at Arnold Nikolayevich, you'd wonder where his education had all gone! His eyes were popping, his face was whiter than chalk and looked that barmy, you'd think someone had knocked the sense out of him with a sandbag. We were sorry for him, but we just couldn't help laughing. There was the master shaking his fists over him, tying all kinds of words up into tricky knots, and shouting, 'Pull away, if you don't want to feed the sharks!' And Gentleman Arnold stood there on his knees, his hands shaking like he had the fever, and pulled away at that tail like he meant to tear it right off. We could imagine the ships shying at us in the fog, thinking they had run in towards the coast. It was a scream, I tell you. Funnier than a theatre."

The carpenter's last words were drowned in a burst of hearty laughter.

"You *are* a one for telling funny stories, Comrade Khilkov!" Tatiana said. Then she asked, "And what became of that gentleman?"

Flattered by the pantrywoman's interest, the carpenter explained:

"Nothing. He went out fishing with us many times after that. He was very grateful to us for having set him on his feet. He picked up physically, too. Wasn't afraid of the sea any more. And got the knack of working. Became a regular fisherman, in fact. Never spoke about suicide any more."

There were no nicer men in the world than seamen, Tatiana thought as she went back to the saloon.

IX

In the Dutch port of destination we moored alongside the quay. The heavy hooks of latticed cranes hung over the ship's deck. The tall stacks of the paper-mills belched smoke into the cloudy sky within less than a hundred yards of the waterside.

After the ship and her crew had been examined by the police authorities, the customs officers and the medical officer, unloading was started. The cranes awoke with a clang of iron. Shouts were heard in a strange tongue. Trucks rolled out of a building, stopped briefly next to the crane to receive a large sling of timber, then raced on and disappeared into another building. They went round in a circle, but the effect was as if hundreds of them were dashing in and out. The timber stack towering above the deck gradually dwindled and the ship's hull rose out of the water.

Tatiana and the sailors went to see the little town. Back in the harbour, all had been noise and bustle, but here the spacious streets lined with trimmed trees were sunk in deep repose. The pretty two-storeyed little houses with their front gardens and curtained windows had an air of well-nourished prosperity about them. Even the dogs looked well-fed. It was such a contrast to what they had seen in Germany, which was full of beggars. One could tell at a glance that while other nations had been busy cutting each other's throats and ruining one another, the Dutch had been trading and raking in the profits.

Tatiana saw Amsterdam, too, where she went by train.

This time she was accompanied only by the ship's officers—the chief engineer, the first and second mates, and the W. T.-man.

Back on the ship that night, she could not fall asleep for a long time. Her head thronged with impressions. It

seemed as if she had seen it all in a dream—all those canals that divided the city into separate islands; ships, large and small, coming right down the streets and mooring alongside the houses; huge squares with monuments and ancient Gothic churches; restaurants with thrilling music; the hot glances of foreign seamen, who gave themselves up to junketing with a wild abandon.

The next day, at breakfast, the Captain said to the pantrywoman, "Well, Tatiana, did you have a good time in town?"

"Thank you, Captain! I had a lovely time. To tell you the truth, I like it on your ship very much."

For a fleeting moment a breath of spring warmed the captain's age-chilled heart, and his moustache twitched.

"I'll take you to the music hall myself when we get to England," he said.

His subordinates protested.

"Oh, Captain! That's cruel of you. Robbing us of the pleasure of going out for a walk ashore with Tatiana Petrovna!"

The third mate cited the Bible story in a dreary droning voice like a priest in church.

"When King David was old and his blood got no heat, his servants sought and found for him the fairest damsel for to lie in his bosom. . . ."

The Captain looked into his glass of strong tea embarrassedly.

The pantrywoman's admirers in the saloon increased in number. Even the phlegmatic wireless operator began to show signs of life and feeling. Previously he had run women down and frequently quoted his favourite saying, "Love is a fraud. It is like the gilding on tinsel, it soon wears off and loses its glitter, leaving only the rust of family life."

But now he cast admiring glances at Tatiana more often than any of the others. He would wrinkle his absurd-

looking nose and utter ponderous compliments in high-flown language.

"Listen to our radio-man!" cried the second mate. "What's come over him? Not so long ago he was a terrible woman-hater."

"That is not true," the wireless operator protested. "How could I be a woman-hater when I came into the world together with a woman."

"How's that?"

"Quite simple. My sister and I are twins."

The saloon was a hubbub of excited voices.

In Holland the *Oktyabr* stood in port for about a week. During that time many of the men had been ashore and paid less attentions to Tatiana. But when they put to sea again, heading for England, the pantrywoman exercised a greater fascination than ever upon all the men.

The steamer, now freed of her cargo, looked bigger. Her load-mark stood high above the water. The breeze strengthened, and the *Oktyabr* began to pitch, her half-exposed blades slapping the surface of the sea.

Tatiana had long been wanting to see the engines. Putting on grey overalls, she opened the door of the engine room. A wave of warm air assailed her. Slowly she descended the iron ladder, holding on to the thin rail. The ship was rolling from side to side and lurching, as though bent on shaking her off the grilled steps. At the bottom she stopped, not daring to go any farther. The third engineer, a tall man with angular shoulders, ran up to her, and taking her hand, conducted her to the bench. He smiled embarrassedly, ashamed of the soiled overalls he was wearing.

"I've come to see what your country looks like," she shouted, trying to make herself heard above the din of the

pounding engines and the booming sea, which now sounded overhead.

"That's very nice of you, Tatiana Petrovna!" the third engineer shouted, his body curved towards her.

She asked him various questions and looked around with interest.

The engine was working with unflagging energy, its iron body shining with oil as if with perspiration. The electric light played upon the burnished brass and steel parts. The crank heads revolving the heavy screw shaft rose and fell under pressure of the connecting rods as if trying to race one another. The metal discs rubbed together like two broad hands. The working beams rocked rhythmically, and rods and levers shuttled back and forth. The hands on the pressure-gauges flickered nervously, showing the tremendous power of the steam that was rushing into the cylinders. Everything here was at shuddering stress. It seemed as if a human brain was hidden somewhere in the engine, controlling its every movement with intelligent and deliberate precision. The enginemen, grimy, greasy, with shiny faces, were clambering about the grating feeling the working parts and oiling them. They tended the machinery as they would court a woman, trying to anticipate her every wish. And yet, tired though they were, they bared their teeth in a jolly smile.

"Show me the nether regions," the pantrywoman said.

The engineer took her down a narrow dingy passage. The stokehold was like a deep black pit. Despite the ventilators, which were working at full blast, it was stuffy down there. Black figures, which had no resemblance to human beings, loomed dimly in the semi-dark. The ash-pits rumbled. A broad-shouldered man opened the furnace door and, bending down, began to rake the coal with a poker and to break up the red-hot cinders on the fire-bars. The brilliant flame and overpowering heat dazzled the pantrywoman. For a moment she shut her eyes. When

she opened them again she saw the whites of eyes in the men's grimy faces turned upon her with a look of displeasure. She had not recognized any of them and only now became aware that the stokers were half-naked, clad only in their work trousers. She backed out hastily.

She thought it more wonderful than ever on the upper deck. Down below she had very nearly been taken sick. Now she filled her lungs with the pure sea air and it was exhilarating. There was not a cloud in the sky, which was an intense sun-drenched blue. The gambolling wind sang in the rigging and the ventilator cowls. The boundless sea, emerald-tinted and dove-grey, lay pulsing and lustrous, heaving with foam-tipped cones.

The admiration for Tatiana grew into worship. She began to receive gifts. A box of chocolates or figs, sometimes a package with fruit would be hung on the door handle outside her cabin. Often the present bore an inscription, such as: "Sweet Sea-Gull" or "Sea Lily." The boatswain plaited for her out of tarred rope strands a small fish with fins and tail and brass beads for eyes. Engineman Ryabinkin, the ship's best mechanic, made her a metal anchor with a sliding panel containing a tiny compartment for needles, pins and a thimble. One of the anchor flukes bore the cryptic words: "The comet's tail is coiled round my heart." Khilkov the carpenter put his oar in too. Seizing his opportunity one evening when Tatiana was alone in her cabin, he came in and pulled out from under his oilskins a shining casket smelling of fresh varnish.

"What's that?" Tatiana asked, surprised.

"Just a keepsake," Khilkov answered shyly, and fled from the cabin like a thief.

She had not even had a chance to thank him, but he carried away from her a radiant smile.

Vasilisa visited the pantrywoman more often. She

asked who the presents were from, and praised them with ill-concealed envy.

"I feel so awkward about them bringing me all these presents," Tatiana said.

Vasilisa pursued a subtle wary policy, heading her young and inexperienced rival straight towards disaster.

"There's nothing wrong in that, my dear. It's not as if the men were demanding anything for it. Sailors are a happy-go-lucky lot—they just love to throw money about. You should worry, anyway! Take what's given you, and don't bother your head about it. When you get married all that'll stop. You'll be glad to get presents then, but there won't be any coming."

Vasilisa propped her fat chin up in her hand and fell into a reminiscent mood.

"There was a time when the men were mad about me, too. And how! Ran after me in crowds. As for presents, they showered them on me. Everything your heart could desire, bless you. And talk about kissing! Christ's feet had never been kissed half as much. And I don't repent it now, not a bit. At least I've got something to remember."

The steamer was approaching British shores. The noonday sun gilded the blue waters. Foreign ships were met ever more often.

The sailors were sitting aft, on the third hatch. This had become the crew's favourite spot. Here one had a better chance of seeing Tatiana and letting her see you. Some sat reading books, others talking and gazing ahead in anticipation of sighting a lightship on the horizon.

Vasilisa came up. Seeing the carpenter, who was sitting with the others, she could not resist taunting him:

"Comrade Khilkov! I hear that you make very nice caskets. What do you sell them at?"

The carpenter leapt to his feet as if a wasp had stung him, and stared blankly at the woman.

"What d'you mean? Have you gone crazy? When did you see me selling caskets?"

Vasilisa jerked her head sternward and countered with another question:

"Did you give that one away for nothing then?"

The sailors caught her drift and burst out laughing.

The carpenter stood looking as if he had just received news of his whole family's sudden death and his mind had not taken it in yet. When he found his tongue at last, he shouted in a flustered voice:

"You darned mischief-maker! When will that tongue of yours wither away!"

"When you grow a dog's tail."

Ryabinkin, who was sitting on the hatch, got up quickly and turned to go away.

"What's the hurry, ducky?" Vasilisa checked him. "Wait a minute. I wanted to talk to you about that toy anchor."

"Oh, go and—— Ugh, you're enough to make a saint swear!" he retorted. Then, whistling, he slipped away into the engine room.

The carpenter's face was livid with fury. Amid jeers and laughter, he kept growling at Vasilisa in an attempt to cover up his confusion.

"You doggone Egyptian plague, you! You slut! By ancient laws killing would have been too easy a death for you! You ought to be burnt in a fire like a barren fig-tree!"

The woman was cut to the quick. The stunning blow threw her off her balance. Her features distorted with rage, she cried shrilly, like a little girl:

"Maybe I didn't want to bring beggars into the world! How do you know? Anybody can have a child—there's nothing easier! Why, if I wanted to, I could have had children of every nation!"

Rage choked further utterance, and she quickly retreated to her cabin, fuming, crushed, and miserable.

The carpenter, still simmering, flung out after her:

"May the sea-devil get you in the family way, and may you give birth to a quill pig...."

The masts of a lightship hove in sight on the horizon.

X

In England the *Oktyabr* stood in dock for several days, filling up with coal.

Now she was homeward bound.

Anyone from outside glancing at the steamer would have been astonished to see what apple-pie order the ship was kept in. The men went blithely about their duties and needed no driving. Everything was clean and tidy. And no wonder, for first thing in the morning the sailors, armed with hose pipes, washed down the decks and all the wooden superstructures. Outside the bath-room there was a constant queue: everyone was eager to flaunt a fresh body. Shaving became a daily rite. What is more, everyone began to use eau-de-Cologne. Their watch over, the men came up on the deck clean, spruced up and scented. All had a swaggering air and all carried books. Gone were the former grimy untidy seamen.

But appearances are deceptive. Actually, things were not at all satisfactory on shipboard. Beneath the surface an undercurrent of fierce passions raged around Tatiana. It may have started as a passing infatuation, but rivalry fanned it into an intense flame. These strong muscular men had been completely swept off their feet by this little woman with her winning smiles, the promising glance of her golden eyes, her luring lips, and the sudden blushes that flamed in her cheeks. She went to everyone's head like rich wine, like the intoxicating scents of the blossoming young earth at springtime. The sea was to blame for that. It was the sea, now gleaming like blue brocade spangled with sunshine, now heaving and rushing with

the noise of a cataract, that had turned Tatiana into a sort of goddess and the men into idolaters. She had but to command anyone "Jump overboard with the vessel going full speed and haul yourself back by the log-line" for the thing to be done at once without question.

Late one afternoon Tatiana was sitting in her cabin drinking tea. Before her, on a small table, lay boxes of sweets. The ship was homeward bound, and despite the growly splashing of the sea, life seemed wonderful to her, a thing of joy and sunshine. The fears of her old mother, who had warned her at parting to be careful with the sailors, had been groundless. Both the officers and the sailors had turned out to be real gentlemen. How kind they all were to her! They were ready to sacrifice their all, expecting nothing in return. Such noble feelings were to be met with only in books. She liked them all, some more than others, but all without exception. She had even taken a liking to Vasilisa. The thought of the men brought a gentle smile to Tatiana's face.

Vasilisa came into the cabin.

Tatiana moved over to the bunk and motioned Vasilisa to the vacated folding-stool.

"Sit down and have some tea," she said.

"I don't mind."

Tatiana poured out a glass of strong tea.

"Will you have it with chocolates or sweets?"

"I prefer chocolates. They're more respectable-like."

Borodkin had slept with Vasilisa the previous night, and so she was in an excellent humour. Inwardly she exulted over Tatiana, but outwardly she was amiability itself.

They fell to talking about the ship's next trip, wondering where she would go and what cargo she would take. Tatiana would be visiting many ports. The future was alluring.

"I love ship life!" she cried delightedly. "I could go on sailing like this all my life!"

Vasilisa agreed with everything she said, then taking advantage of an opening, she inserted:

"Oh, these men, these men! The more I see of them the more I wonder."

"What about?" Tatiana asked.

"Take Borodkin, for instance. The lad's simply killing himself. And what a fine man he is! One in a thousand these days. He doesn't drink, he's hard-working, and decent. Nature's nobleman. He doesn't say anything, but he's a hundred times better than all that measly bunch."

Tatiana's eyes opened wide.

"Killing himself?" she queried.

Vasilisa shook her head ruefully.

"Ah, what an innocent little canary you are! You're so young, you don't see a thing. Don't you remember what a bonny lad he was? Cheeks that ruddy, you could light a cigarette at them. And now? He walks about the ship like a lost soul. He's just pining away. A shadow of his old self. And mark me—one of these days he'll do away with himself."

Tatiana jumped up, and her hands flew to her face from which all the colour had drained.

"What's the matter with him?"

Vasilisa pushed her glass away and got up too.

"Thanks for the treat. I'll be going now."

Tatiana gripped Vasilisa impulsively by the shoulder.

"Wait a minute. Explain yourself. What's the matter with Borodkin?"

The older woman threw a melancholy look into her face.

"That's the way it is with some people—it's in the book of fate for a man to save another's life and then to start playing with death himself."

On her way out she added:

"Most likely he'll throw himself overboard."

Left alone, Tatiana stood staring at the closed door for several minutes. What she had just learned had stunned her. She sat down on the stool and dropped her head in her hands. She did not feel the rolling of the ship, did not hear the sullen rumble of the sea outside. She was crushed with a sense of self-reproach. Was she, unwittingly, to be the murderer of the man who had saved her life? It would be sheer madness! Life would not be worth living after that. She would have to save him whatever happened. Luckily Vasilisa had opened her eyes in time. Surrounded by the kindly attentions of the men, Tatiana had been too happy to notice another's suffering.

Dusk had fallen upon the sea by the time she came up on deck. The breeze was strengthening and its song swelled louder. The running head seas wore veils of foam, and they came rolling up without end. Tatiana went up onto the bridge.

"Ah, Tatiana Petrovna! What's the news?" the second mate greeted her.

"Nothing much. I've come to ask whether you want any tea."

"No, thanks. I'll soon be relieved, and then we'll have tea."

While talking to the mate Tatiana watched Borodkin, who was standing with two other sailors. He really did look pale and haggard through sleepless nights spent over his books. The mental strain was telling on him. He had blue shadows round his sunken eyes, and this gave to his face a look of suffering. He turned away from her, ashamed to look into the pure and innocent eyes of the girl whose love he was trying to win by unworthy means. A feeling as of something unclean and sticky clung to him after the previous night spent with the dissolute Vasilisa. He became aware of it only now, in the presence of this sweet girl, who was opening for love like a bud in May. And she, fresh from the impression of her talk

with the cunning woman, felt a pang in her heart as she looked at him. That night, or perhaps that very minute, in a fit of wild despair, he would throw himself overboard.

"You seem to be upset, Tatiana Petrovna," the second mate remarked.

"Oh no, not at all," she answered quickly, forcing a smile into her face.

The wind fondled her hair and whipped her flimsy blouse.

Despite himself, the officer was lost in admiration of her.

The running lights were switched on—a green one to starboard and a red one to port. The top-light flashed on the foremast, but something went wrong with the second top-light on the mainmast.

"One of you go aloft and see to that light," the second mate said to the group of sailors.

"I'll go!" Borodkin said eagerly.

The higher he climbed up the swaying mast the more nervous did Tatiana grow as she watched him. The shrouds came to an end a few feet short of the top-light. Borodkin reached it by hauling himself up with arms and legs hugging the mast. In that precarious position he started work on the lamp, exerting every ounce of muscle to keep from falling from the dizzy height. When the ship listed he hung over the abyss. Glancing down at the pantrywoman in her white blouse and dark skirt, with her fair uncovered head, he thought, "Let her see how a sailor can work!" For her sake he was ready to climb still higher, right up to the trucks, even in the fiercest gale. Tatiana did not take her eyes off him for a minute. Her head thrown back, she gripped the rail with bated breath, expecting him at any moment to come crashing down on the deck or hurtle to his death in the waves. Just then he was dear to her as no other man in the whole crew was. And when the wind tore the cap off his head and whirled

it furiously out to sea like a black bird, Tatiana cried, "Oh!"

At last the light went on.

Borodkin descended safely to the deck.

Tatiana ran into her cabin, and, on the spur of the moment, scribbled a note: "Come today. I will be waiting for you betweeen 11 and 12." On the poop she met Borodkin, who had come to look at the log. She thrust the note into his hand and fled.

The appointed hour found him standing outside her cabin, pulling down his new sweater and adjusting his tie. He examined his black trousers and shining boots. Everything was shipshape. At last he tapped softly upon the door with his finger-nail alone. There came her sweet thrilling voice, "Come in!"

She offered him the stool and sat down on the bunk.

Both were deeply agitated. They said all the wrong things, not the things they wanted to say. He sat with lowered head, twisting his new cap about in his hands. She looked at him, thinking, "I liked him better when he was working aloft, risking his life." Up there she had thought him a hero, but down here she saw just an ordinary man with a pomaded head sitting in front of her. There was something shifty about his whitish eyes in combination with that freckled face and reddish moustache. At the same time she felt sorry for him.

Tatiana patted her hair and turned to the sailor with an engaging smile.

"You've grown thin, Maxim. You are not ill by any chance, are you?"

"No, not at all," he answered, startled.

"Why do you go about looking so blue?"

He remembered what Vasilisa had told him, and answered:

"I'm sick of life."

"Maxim! How can you say that? What's the matter with you?"

There was a world of warmth in her voice.

Borodkin decided that now was the time to speak out. He drew his brows together sternly, as though bracing himself for the plunge, and, looking into the woman's golden eyes, said in an official tone:

"Tatiana Petrovna, I want to——"

He had clean forgotten the phrase he had so carefully rehearsed, but the next moment it came back to him, and he uttered it in an overloud unnatural voice:

"I want to get spliced with you."

The sound of his own voice frightened him. Swaying on the stool together with the deck, he looked round.

He was all alone in the cabin with Tatiana, who had jumped off the cot. That electric light was much too bright. He wished it had been dark. He would have been bolder then. He strained his ears to catch her reply. After an agonizing pause that seemed an eternity he heard her saying:

"To get spliced! That's too serious a step for me."

"But we have plenty of time."

She neither promised nor refused. She merely asked him to wait. She stroked his strong work-hardened hand.

Outside, Vasilisa had her eager ear at the keyhole, devouring every word that was being spoken.

Afterwards she hunted out the most gossipy sailor in the crew and told him in the strictest confidence:

"Borodkin's with the pantrywoman. She's done. But not a word to anyone."

Foul whisperings got aboard. They were heard hissing in the forecastle, on the bridge, in the stokehold and the engine room.

Borodkin came out of the cabin at four in the morning, just when his watch came on.

XI

The *Oktyabr* went steadily on her way, as if nothing had happened on board.

It was a bleak morning, and the sky was overcast. The sea had a faded look. A gentle southeaster was blowing head-on.

Tatiana went up on deck and made her way towards the galley with a large shining copper kettle in one hand, and an enamelled coffee-pot in the other. The first thing that struck her was that the sailors were wearing soiled clothes and some of them were even in rags. Her greetings went unanswered as if all the men had suddenly gone deaf. This was still more puzzling. What could this change mean? The cook, that always genial Petrovich, wore such a greasy apron that one would think he had used it to dry dirty dishes with. He did not run forward to offer his services as he usually did. On the contrary, he turned away from her with a scowl. She had to fill the kettle herself. She put the coffee-pot on the hot range and waited until the coffee was ready. Meanwhile, outside the galley, a grimy stoker was holding the carpenter by the sleeve, telling him a story in a voice that was deliberately loud:

"When I was little I once caught an insect. You see, it was shining in the sun just like green gold. I thought I'd never seen anything in the world as beautiful as that insect. You see, it was a feast for the eyes. But my father opened them for me. It turned out to be just one of those beastly flies that feed on carrion. You see. We grown-ups are sometimes taken in the same way."

Someone swore softly, tentatively, as if using bad language for the first time in his life, and another tittered like a schoolboy in the presence of his master. And when Tatiana, cold with a nameless fear, went aft, the swearing behind her back sounded more emphatic and pointed. The carpenter Khilkov overtook her near the poop.

"Just a minute."

"What is it?" she said, stopping.

The carpenter glanced at the woman's pale face and said sullenly:

"They say you've married Borodkin. Is it true?"

Tatiana winced, and an angry flush rose to her cheeks.

"Let people mind their own business!"

Her back up now, she added loudly and distinctly for all to hear:

"If you want to know—yes, I've married Borodkin! Any more questions while the shop is open?"

"No," the carpenter muttered.

He went away, a drooping figure with bent back.

"Well?" the sailors asked him when he came back.

"She admits it, the hussy!" the carpenter said with a tremor in his voice.

Brikalov, who had just come up, covered his own vexation with a laugh and said:

"So you've been laying yourself out for nothing, Khilkov?"

The carpenter glared at him.

"Look who's talking! An eagle in hen's feathers. Who was it went about bragging, 'No woman can stand up to me'? Gone up like a rocket and come down like the stick."

"A stick in the mud," the engineman added.

The others went for Brikalov too.

That day was an evil day on board the ship. Everyone felt he had had a raw deal, had been cheated. What rankled most was that Tatiana had chosen the worst man in the whole crew. How did she dare to do that! What was wrong with Brikalov, for instance—as fine a figure of a man as ever there was! And wasn't the carpenter somebody in the ship with a cabin all to himself? And who did the crew elect as their trade-union organizer if not the most esteemed man, who had his comrades' trust? And hadn't the cook been employed in first-class restaurants

before he came to the ship? He knew his business so well that he could make a savoury dish out of a dirty swab, like a conjurer. And what was wrong with any of the other sailors for that matter? One played the guitar, another had a marvellous gift of the gab, a third was as handsome a man as ever walked a ship's deck. There wasn't a man who did not have some advantage or other over Borodkin. Now take the enginemen—look how much they had to learn to get smooth running out of that steel giant with its maze of pipes and levers! Even a stoker was not just anybody—that, too, required special knowledge. And wasn't the boatswain second to none in the whole crew? On all the seas and oceans there wasn't a vessel unless it was a pig's trough that could do without a boatswain. As for the ship's officers—that went without saying. They were all educated men. They had called her by her name and patronymic and treated her as an equal, while she, the giddy-headed little ninny, had insulted them by throwing herself away on Borodkin.

When Tatiana came out on the upper deck one of the sailors shouted:

"This ship is no place for love affairs! We'll have to raise the question at the general meeting!"

"Quite right! This steamer's not a brothel!" others chimed in.

Each man went out of his way to insult her. Swearing aboard ship steadily spread and took on a fuller flavour than ever before.

The boatswain stood in the forecastle, grinning and excited. He had been spewing curses for a steady hour without hardly repeating himself, itemizing the sky, and the sea, and the hidden sun, and all God's creatures that lived on land and in the water. Not a single item had escaped his notice. Even the engine pounding below, the smoke belching from the funnel, and the whole vessel in toto and in detail had come in for their share of invec-

tive. It was a long time since such a masterpiece of profanity had been heard on board the steamer. He twisted his body, and waved his arms about like a fanatic who had fallen into a religious ecstasy.

"My, listen to him squirting!" one of the men said with a nervous laugh. "He's raised a ripple on the sea."

Vasilisa kept coming out on the deck, casting triumphant glances at the sailors. She had achieved her end—crushed her rival and avenged the insults she had suffered. She was enjoying the rare sweet of victory. She felt younger, better looking, and walked with a buoyancy as if she had thrown ten years off her shoulders. Her eyebrowless face wore a greasy smile.

Tatiana, pale and shaken, went up on the bridge to invite the Captain to dinner.

Catching sight of her, Vasilisa suddenly grew grave and turned fiercely upon the men.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, opening such foul mouths! You sons of sin! How can you use such language in front of women!"

"Oh, shut up, you hell-cat!"

"Listen to her! Their ladyships of toads' pond!"

"Call yourself a woman? You're Satan in a skirt!"

Vasilisa flew into a rage.

"And what are you? Big blustering goofs! Who voted not to swear any more, to behave like respectable citizens? And where's that respectability of yours now? Twenty thousand chained dogs couldn't bark half as much as you have done since this morning. A ruble per swear word! Goodness me, if it came to fining, you'd collect enough money to buy two big steamships with."

The cook that day was a failure. The soup was sour and oversalted, and the second course, the stewed meat, was burnt almost to a cinder. The food flew overboard to the accompaniment of more strong language. It was a day of troubles. The stokers got up too much steam one

minute, and too little the next. One engineman very nearly melted the engine bearings. The helmsmen were unable to hold the vessel steady on her course—she yawed and rolled from left to right, rousing the ire of the navigating officers. All the men were in a bad temper and quarrelled with each other like sworn enemies.

Only one seaman out of the whole crew went about with an air of having a joke all to himself. That man was Maxim Borodkin.

Captain Abrikosov was as cool as ever. He knew the ways of the world too well to let his serenity be disturbed by such trifles. He walked up and down the bridge, scanning the horizon, and every once in a while smiled into his grey moustache, thinking: "It'll all shake down."

Never in her life had Tatiana been so disappointed in people. Could these be the same jolly boys who had been so nice to her? They all glared at her now with hatred and were ready to walk over her as if she were dirt. She had never heard such foul language. It seemed as if she had been caught up in a torrent of filth that eddied all round her. It was sickening. She went about her duties mechanically, with a stony face and a mist of pain in her eyes. Her nerves were taut and quivering, like the wire of the aerial.

What had she done? What offence was she guilty of?

In the evening, her work done, Tatiana went to her cabin and flung herself on the bunk. Here, with no one to see her, she could have a good cry. She thought of her brother, a seaman sailing somewhere in the Far East, and wondered whether he was as nasty as all these men who lived with her in the same steamer. A cold sense of bewilderment oppressed her. She sobbed her heart out. If only someone would comfort her, say a kind word to her! But the cabin was empty and dismal, like a coffin.

Vasilisa came in. She had come to exult over her young rival, to taste anew the sweet of victory. But when she

saw the girl curled up on the bunk as if with cold, when she saw the pillow wet with her tears, pity stirred in her breast. How often, when life had misused her, had she sought her bed and sobbed her heart out upon it. Her pillow alone had known all the anguish of a lonely woman's lot. She felt ashamed of the role she was playing. She began speaking to Tatiana kindly and frankly, as though she were her own daughter.

"You mustn't take on like that, poor darling!"

The tender note in her voice touched Tatiana. She raised her eyes, red with weeping, to the elderly woman's face, and snuggled up to her like a hurt child to its mother.

"Why do they treat me so? What have I done?"

Vasilisa put her arm round her.

"They are all wild because you've taken up with Borodkin, that's what it is."

"Oh, but it isn't true!" Tatiana protested vehemently. "He only asked me to marry him. I wanted to save him from killing himself, so I promised I would."

Impetuously, with flashing eyes, she added:

"I feel like inviting Borodkin here this very night. To spite them all I really will take up with him!"

"What are you talking about, you silly child!" Vasilisa cried, flinging her hands up in horror. "It's a very good thing that you haven't sinned. You've got to get used to a man, get to know his character first. . . ."

She remonstrated with the girl in such an earnest tone, the while she softly stroked her head, that Tatiana felt easier, and the numb feeling at her heart relaxed.

"Tell me frankly, Vasilisa, what does it all mean?"

"What did you expect? They're men! I know them only too well. I've dealt with so many of them in my time! The only use they have for us is to satisfy their beastly lust."

"Is that all?"

"What did you think—that they really idolized you? What a silly little bird you are! They're just a bunch of love-pirates, that's all."

Vasilisa's lips suddenly twitched.

"Ugh, how I hate them!" she went on. "May God forgive my sinful soul! The one thing He didn't give me was patience. The greed of the body often gets the better of me. If it wasn't for that I'd make those accursed men crawl round me on their knees, I would!"

Tatiana stared at the elderly woman with round eyes.

"Surely they're not all like that?"

"They're all much of a muchness—the ignorant and the educated, the poor and the rich. I lived in a gentleman's house in my young days. He was properly gone on me, used to kiss my hands. And talk about doing the amiable—he looked as if butter would not melt in his mouth. Afterwards he deserted me, the dirty skunk. He got me so that I couldn't have children—so the doctors said. From then on I went to the bad. I ran after the men—anxious to have a child, I was. But it was no use. It was barren I was going to be till the end of my days. And there'd be no one to shut my eyes when I pegged out. Not even a dog would howl over my grave, let alone a human being."

Vasilisa's voice broke, and tears rolled down her puckered face. It was now Tatiana's turn to comfort her. Other people's sorrow always touched her tender heart.

The two women, one fading, the other blooming, sat for a long time on the bunk, pouring their hearts out to each other.

When the *Oktyabr* called back at the German port stoker Perekatov came on board. He waved his hand to his comrades while still in the boat, shouting cheerily: "Hullo, there. Oktyabrists!"

But no one had answered him. Carrying a yellow suitcase in one hand, he climbed aboard with such haste that one would think he had his family there. He was wearing a new navy-blue suit and a brown knitted tie, and his grey cap was tilted back in a dashing manner, his forehead bared for all to see. In place of the former swelling there was now only a small scar over his eyebrow. The stoker smiled with a conscious air of being absolutely irresistible. He was all eagerness to see the girl for whose sake he had gone through such torments, but the sailors crowded round him, grimy and untidy. He shook hands with them, throwing impatient glances aft, but Tatiana was nowhere to be seen.

"No use shooting your eyes that way, pal," one of the sailors said to him. "You're too late."

"What do you mean?" Perekatov's voice had gone flat.

The man pointed to Borodkin, who was standing on the poop.

"See that fiz shining like a buttered pancake? Well, he's gone and done it—your flame's broken-kneed."

It was clear now why Borodkin, unlike the others, was well dressed. After getting rid of his ugly bump, the stoker fondly believed that Tatiana was his for the taking. Indeed, who could vie with him? And now this news came so unexpectedly that it almost stunned him. All the boilers exploding while he was keeping the watch could not have dealt him a nastier blow.

He hurried off to the crew's quarters, his lips moving soundlessly as if he had suddenly lost his voice.

The *Oktyabr* raised anchor and got under way.

After raining steadily for days on end, sunny weather set in with starlit nights. The ship's bell struck every half hour. The watches came on and off. Life moved in its accustomed groove with peaceful monotony. The sailors

alone found no peace. Where before there had been merry jokes punctuated by laughter, one now heard surly shouts.

Vasilisa had taken the pantrywoman under her protection. She defied the whole crew, and the last word in an argument was always hers. In this respect her resources were amazing. She tackled each man separately, poking merciless fun at his failings, and railed at them all in good set terms.

"Because the girl didn't ask your advice you're all mad at her! She can have dealings with the devil for that matter. What's it got to do with you? Acting the noble gentlemen, too, you damned windbags, you! In word you're as sweet as honey, but in deed—bitter wormwood."

Vasilisa scolded the whole day long, scolded fiercely until she was hoarse.

The third mate in passing her dropped the remark:

"She isn't a woman, she's an internal secretion gland!"

Vasilisa jumped down his throat.

"And what about you? A heart with pepper and a soul with mustard. Talk about secret glands!"

While thus keeping the men at bay, she comforted and coaxed Tatiana.

"You shouldn't think of leaving the ship, girlie," she said. "Where will you find another berth like this? As for their swearing, there's no great harm in that. Curses are not pitch, they don't stick to your body. Besides, they'll soon fizzle out, those water-devils."

As a matter of fact, as the ship drew nearer home, other interests occupied the men's minds. Everyone had friends or relatives ashore and was eager to see them. The storm that had raged around the pantrywoman gradually died down.

The library now was entirely neglected. Borodkin was the only man who went on with his reading. His neat dress set him apart from the others. He began to assume heroic stature in Tatiana's eyes.

XII

When the *Oktyabr* dropped anchor in her home port, the authorities came on board. After the various formalities were completed the customs officers began their inspection of the vessel.

Everyone was now thinking of his home and family ashore.

The men's attitude towards Tatiana had changed for the better, as if nothing had happened between her and the rest of the crew.

She had decided to leave the ship at once, but then changed her mind. For one thing Vasilisa had been urging her not to throw up her berth, and for another, she had begun to take a greater liking to Maxim Borodkin: he had turned out to be a splendid fellow. But the main thing was that the sailors were once more the good-natured jolly men she had known before. She forgot her grievance. She became her old sunny self, and her rippling laugh rang loud again.

The State Steamship Line decided to temporarily transfer the *Oktyabr* to one of the northern ports to speed up timber shipments to foreign ports. This was exciting news. It meant the crew taking long leave of their families while Arctic navigation lasted. So as not to go out with empty holds, the steamer loaded up with rails, newsprint, and sugar in casks. This cargo was consigned to home consumers up in the North.

The former wireless operator had fallen ill with appendicitis and was sent to the hospital for an operation. A new man named Grigory Ostrovzorov took his place. He was about twenty-eight, slightly above medium height, with a strong well-knit figure. He came on board during the dinner-hour, when there was a break in the work. With him came an Eskimo dog with a white, fluffy coat, and shaggy calves that looked like riding-breeches. He boldly fol-

lowed his master, his sensitive pointed ears pricked up, and his bushy tail curled into a ring on his back. The new radio-man, carrying two little suitcases, made for the saloon. Tatiana met him on deck near the fourth hatch. She glanced at the newcomer's face—except for a short-trimmed moustache it was clean-shaven and had a healthy tan. A pair of large grey eyes with a sort of wondering peering look behind them returned her glance from under the light-coloured peak of his nautical cap. Tatiana felt oddly put out. And when the dog ran up to her with canine curiosity to sniff her over with its back varnished-looking nose, she backed against the ship's side and cried out in alarm, "Oh, I'm afraid!"

The dog looked up at her with its black intelligent eyes, and wagged its ring-like tail by way of friendly introduction.

The wireless operator smiled at her.

"That's all right, miss. He never bites anyone unless he has good reason."

She coloured deeply and laughed.

"I love gentle dogs," she said, patting the Eskimo on the head.

"That's splendid," Ostrovzorov said. "We'll be shipmates."

Then he turned to the dog.

"Come along, Nord."

Tatiana followed them with smiling eyes.

Some of the crew had witnessed this scene, and each man said to himself: things will come right now.

The *Oktyabr* left port and headed out into the immensity of sky and water. A gentle breeze blew to port bow. Wavelets rolled across the wilderness of sea with a dull glint. The ship passed familiar islands inhabited by fishermen. Sometimes the fantastic tower of a lighthouse loomed on the horizon. It was comforting to know that the course set on the ship's chart was true, and that in

the night another beacon would paint the darkness for her with brilliant cones of light.

Tatiana had not changed a whit as far as her duties were concerned. The forecastle was kept in the same perfect order. Her deft hands performed wonders of efficiency, and no one could find fault with her.

In the evenings Maxim Borodkin visited her in her cabin. She liked him, but not enough to consent immediately to marrying him. She forbade him once and for all to speak about it, declaring, "I'll tell you myself when the time comes."

Although nothing like the former dandyism existed on board the ship, traces of her influence upon the men were still in evidence. It was somehow awkward to go about looking dirty and untidy with a beautiful woman about the place. And so the crew, on the whole, were a tidier set of men than those one usually meets on a freight steamer.

The pantrywoman was now perfectly familiar with the ways of deep-water men. She had seen the good in them and the bad. The relations between her and the crew improved day by day. One thing she never suspected, however, was that with the arrival of Ostrovzorov on board the ship the whole crew showed the keenest interest in the prospect of a new romance. The thought of such an attractive woman living with a man like Borodkin—and everyone was certain that she did—rankled in the men's minds. It would have been quite a different matter if she had become intimate with the wireless-man. No one's feelings would have been hurt then, for he was handsome, he was clever and smart, had every chance of success, and what is more, was a neutral person who had not been involved in previous events.

The first to start the ball rolling was navigating officer Glazunov. One day, when he was alone with the pantrywoman in the saloon, he remarked to her humorously:

"Well, Comrade Tatiana, you'll have to pay for your sin in the next world."

"What sin?" she asked with a startled upward sweep of her eyelashes.

"Why, no sooner does a new man come aboard the ship than you ensnare him. He can't tear his eyes off you."

Tatiana blushed in confusion.

"I don't know what you are talking about."

The navigating officer ignored her remark.

"I must say, though, that I approve your taste. In the old days any countess would have married such a handsome lad."

And he went out, leaving her in a flutter.

He went straight to the wireless cabin. After chatting with the wireless operator on various matters, he suddenly said:

"You probably have the devil's luck with women, Grigory Pavlovich!"

Ostrovzorov laid the headphones down on the table, and rubbed his forehead in perplexity.

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, the ship's queen fell for you right away."

"Nonsense. It's your imagination."

They went on discussing the pantrywoman. That was in the afternoon. And in the evening, over the supper, the navigating officer saw Tatiana and Ostrovzorov exchange furtive glances. Both were anxious to verify Glazunov's observations. The thing stared them in the face.

From that evening onwards both felt a pleasant flutter of excitement. The ball had been set in motion. Every fresh meeting saw them taking a greater interest in each other. Nord did his bit, too, in bringing them together. Tatiana was fond of the dog and expressed her admiration of him in front of his master.

"This Nord of yours is wonderful! He's all white as white, but his nose and eyes are black. A real beauty! And so intelligent, too!"

"I picked him up in Murmansk—he was a pup then," Ostrovzorov said, flattered. "This is the third year he's sailing with me. The ports he's been to! He's a regular sea-dog. You ought to see the way he climbs up the side ladder."

Tatiana laughed and fondled Nord, murmuring tenderly:

"D'you hear what your master says about you? You're my darling little doggie!"

Nord wagged his ring-like tail and looked up into the girl's face with affection shining in his black eyes.

In the evenings, from six to eight, the pantrywoman was always to be found in the library. The seamen were gradually recovering their zest for reading, and jokes and laughter could be heard there once more. Ostrovzorov came there too. His appearance was a signal for demonstrations of respect. Caps were pulled off and heads bowed.

"Good evening, Grigory Pavlovich!" they would greet him.

"What's the news, Grigory Pavlovich?" others would ask. "Are the bourgeoisie up to any mischief? You're the ears of our *Oktyabr*, one might say."

"There's nothing much," the wireless operator would answer with a laugh.

Perekatov, his cap tilted to the back of his head, would hold forth.

"I went to the wireless cabin the other day, boys. It's the cutest place you've ever seen! Grigory Pavlovich sits there handling his wireless gadgets like a regular wizard. That's what I call smart!"

"Science," the others chimed in.

And when Ostrovzorov had changed his book and was going away, the compliments fell still faster.

"Now, that's a wireless-man for you! Not like the old one: he was a regular scarecrow, that sourbelly. And stuck up, you'd think he was in love with a princess."

"At least this one's easy on the eyes."

"And knows his job too."

"The main thing is he's a sport."

"Yes, a real comrade."

"A corker."

Listening to these raptures, Tatiana could not help falling under their spell. She began to think Ostrovzorov a man among men. At the same time Borodkin steadily fell in her estimation and lost lustre. The seamen smoothed the way for this too. One day, when he came to the library for a book, Brikalov pounced on him.

"I didn't get a wink of sleep through you last night, you ginger image!" he said.

"What's the matter?" Borodkin said, glancing at his adversary out of the tail of his eye.

"You snored like a cart-load of pigs driven to market."

"It's a lie, damn your bloody eyes! I never snore."

The others leagued themselves against him too.

"Instead of denying the facts, you'd better think how your wife's going to sleep with you. You'll snore her into an early grave, you will."

Carpenter Khilkov flung in venomously:

"I'd like to see the woman who's going to marry such an idiot! I used to be ashamed to walk down the street with him—all the cab mares turned their heads away."

"I don't quite agree with you there, Comrade Khilkov," one of the enginemen protested from behind the backs of the others. "There are lots of women in the world. I'm sure he'll find some drivelling idiot."

Stoker Perekatov offered him a piece of advice.

"Don't you listen to these scowbankers, Borodkin. I know a good remedy for you. We've got a fire-swab down in the stokehold. It's a kind of wire brush. We use it for

cleaning the flue-pipes. What's to prevent you from swabbing your nostrils out with it before the wedding?"

Guffaws greeted this suggestion.

Borodkin was quivering with rage. A hard strained look had come into his eyes. If he could he would have torn the forecastle down about the ears of its inmates. He made for the door without waiting for his book, and threw out savagely, "Swine!" Out in the corridor he uttered a loud foul-mouthed oath.

For a moment everyone felt uncomfortable. Khilkov tittered. Someone said, "The rotter! Fancy using such language in front of a lady!"

Tatiana sat bent over the table, fumbling with the catalogues. Her lowered eyelashes were wet and her fingers shook. The man she thought so much of had not been able to hold his own against the coarse jibes of the sailors, and had fallen back on mere cynicism. An exposed abject figure, he had slunk away, leaving in her heart a sense of bitterness and disappointment.

XIII

The ship lay in the port of Arkhangelsk for almost a fortnight. She took on a cargo of heavy logs for England. The stack, as before, towered high above the deck, hedged round with uprights against the ship's sides. Man-ropes were drawn across the top of the stack fore and aft, and planks were fastened to the logs to enable the men to walk across them without breaking their legs. Port formalities took several hours, and at last the *Oktyabr* apprized the neighbourhood of her departure by a protracted hoot.

The leaden clouds hung low. It was drizzling. Clad in a raincoat, Tatiana stood on the poop, gazing at the mighty sweep of the Northern Dvina, whose banks for dozens of miles were cluttered with timber—logs, planks,

squared beams and boards. The ship passed smoking sawmills and foreign steamers moored to wooden wharves. Tatiana had learned to identify their nationality by their flags and funnel markings. The river widened and grew more deserted as they moved downstream. The right bank, with its green bristly woods looming through the drizzle was barely visible, and the left bank had disappeared entirely. Tatiana inexplicably felt sad and homesick. She longed to see her mother, but she was so far away, so hopelessly out of reach.

In the offing a gentle breeze sprang up. It began to rain harder. Occasionally the black hull of an ocean-going steamer or a trading schooner with trimmed sails passed them standing inshore.

Tatiana went to see Vasilisa. The servant was ironing the washing in her tiny cabin, squirting water over it noisily through her mouth. The air had the peculiar smell of freshly ironed linen. The pantrywoman sat down on the sofa, which was upholstered in black leather.

"My heart aches so," she complained.

"Take no notice of it. There's nothing sillier than a woman's heart. Live more with your mind."

The pantrywoman told Vasilisa that Ostrovzorov was courting her, but somehow she was afraid of him, although she liked him.

The wireless operator, knowing Vasilisa and Tatiana to be friends, had long won the elderly woman's favour by his courteous treatment of her. He always addressed her as Vasilisa Ignatievna and asked after her health. True, other men made advances, too, and she lightly gave herself to them, but always in her heart she nursed an undying animosity towards them. The wireless-man held a place apart in her estimation. And so, after she had heard Tatiana out, she spoke her mind.

"Well, I don't see what's wrong with a fine fellow like that courting you. He's a bonny lad, good-looking and

well-mannered, and as for brains, he don't have to go borrowing any from a neighbour. He's one in a thousand. It isn't every day you find that sort knocking around."

Tatiana cheered up immediately, glad to have found justification for her love in the words of such an experienced woman. She hadn't taken a fancy to him for nothing, then.

"But mind you be strict with him, girlie."

"In what sense?" Tatiana asked.

"If he starts getting urgent... don't give way. What I mean is you've got to go and register first."

Tatiana dropped her eyes in confusion.

Vasilisa finished ironing and put the linen away in the cupboard. She had nothing more to do. Sitting down on the sofa next to Tatiana, she resumed:

"Ah, if I were young again! I'd start on quite a different tack. Life has taught me a good deal, but it's too late. I would make men respect me."

She paused and sneezed three times in succession.

"Bless you all the way home," Tatiana laughed.

"Thank you for the good wish."

The two women talked on for quite a long time, and Tatiana came away from her friend wiser by far than she had been before.

The next day the *Oktyabr* passed through the gulf of the White Sea. Soon the waters of the Arctic Ocean would spread before her. The passage here was beset with perils. Creeping fogs rose in the ship's path, and she groped her way northward, blasting the silence with her horn every minute. The seamen knew that dangerous reefs, those masked batteries of death, lay scattered about here, and all faces were set and stern. Everyone seemed to feel the presence of the dead, who had found a watery grave here. Occasionally the sun showed like a greasy smudge on grey paper.

Captain Abrikosov, not trusting the deck officer, stood on the bridge all the time. He preferred coming to grips with the wildest storm to this blind groping in the silent fog; there it was a fair fight in the open, here all was treachery. His face wore a grim look, and he glanced often at the compass, and drilled the grey gloom with a practised eye.

Although there was only a slight breeze, the pitching and tossing increased. The ship was approaching the cross-currents, which formed an area of disturbance. She altered her course, steering north-west. The imaginary line of the Arctic Circle was left behind. Gradually the fog began to thin. A cool September night set in. The cloudless sky was spangled with golden star-clusters. The Arctic Ocean lay becalmed, dozing in a deathly stillness. The upper-deck watch stood at their stations in warm windbreakers.

A spell of fine calm weather set in. Tatiana went out on to the poop whenever she had a moment to spare and feasted her eyes on the rugged beauties of the North. On the portside towered the primordial massif of the mountains. Utterly bare and desolate, their grey silhouettes ran out into the blue distance. Some of them reared their heavy dome-like peaks into the sky, others stood in a huddle of serrated crags, like once storming waves petrified in a variety of shapes. At moments they looked like giants marching down upon the ocean in a wavering front, some of them boldly taking the lead with a thrust of sheer cliffs, others hanging back fearfully, forming bays, inlets, and gulfs within their bends. Here and there among them lay hidden the camps of the brave Pomors—the hardy inhabitants of the White Sea coast. A steam trawler cruised off shore, leaving a trail of smoke behind her. She looked so small that she might have been taken at that distance for a swimming cormorant.

To starboard, running north towards the mysterious pole, lay the majestic Arctic Ocean. There was not a wrinkle upon its surface. Milk-blue, serene and shining, it lay breathing gently, looking utterly peaceful, inspiring absolute confidence. The *Oktyabr* ploughed her way through the Arctic waters, followed by the cries of the sea-gulls and the sobbing of the auks. Small flocks of grebes could be seen making beautiful dives into the limpid depths after their food. Sometimes a beluga would swim to the surface close to the ship's side with a gleam of its long satiny white body, then vanish to reappear on the other side of the vessel. Black specks, like beetles, became faintly visible ahead. They steadily increased until they took the form of native *karbasi*—fishing-boats.

The officer of the watch was pacing the bridge. Sometimes the Captain joined him there. Above them, on the roof of the chartroom next to the standard compass, sat Nord. This was now a favourite spot of his. Milk-white, his sides bulging with food, he sat there on his haunches, surveying the scene with philosophical equanimity. He had the air of being the chief personage on the ship, all the others being his subordinates.

The *Oktyabr* bore seawards. The coast receded and lost its sharp outlines. The mountains turned bluish and looked like distant clouds.

The pantrywoman was now often to be seen in the company of Ostrovzorov. She began to visit him in the wireless cabin. Sometimes they came out on the poop deck and walked up and down for a long time, talking. What about? About anything that came into their heads.

The sight of them cheered the crew's hearts.

"Things are going like a house on fire," the men remarked.

"Aye, they're taking to each other splendidly!"

In the saloon everyone except the Captain openly hinted at their love without ever drawing a protest from

either the pantrywoman or the wireless operator. If anything, they liked it. It gave them a thrilling sense of intoxication.

The crew, meanwhile, proceeded with their task of showing up Borodkin. Usually this was done in Tatiana's presence. One of the seamen would address him with the air of a man anxious to give him some good advice.

"You ought to buy some ointment or something for those freckles of yours, old bean. Your face looks kind of fly-blown, you know."

The moment he opened his mouth to retort he would be attacked from all sides:

"I'd shut up if I were you, you poor swab!"

"Call yourself a seaman, why, you're enough to make a cat laugh."

"He doesn't even look like a human being—just like nothing on earth."

Tatiana, despite herself, fell under the influence of the crew. She began to think that Borodkin really was a good-for-nothing seaman. All the stronger was the impression which the belauded Ostrovzorov made upon her. With his broad open forehead, his grey thoughtful eyes, and the confident carriage of his broad-shouldered figure, he twined himself round her heart ever more strongly, and every day she discovered new endearing traits in his character. And when he sat at his wireless she thought he was the most mysterious and interesting of men. Even his dog was out of the ordinary. No wonder the sailors had made friends with Nord. They often amused themselves with him, and made a great fuss of him.

"That's a fine dog you have there, Grigory Pavlovich!"

"I bet any dog-lover would give a thousand rubles for him!"

Bad times set in for Borodkin. He was in love with a woman who spurned him and was ready at the first opportunity to throw herself into the arms of another man.

The shock of this discovery left him dazed and took all the heart out of him. He still had a hope, slender as a hair, that Tatiana would come to her senses and return to him. Meantime, he avoided her.

It was an extraordinarily calm evening three days later. The pantrywoman was sitting on the iron bitt on the poop deck. Next to her sat Nord, his head in her lap. She was stroking him gently, and his eyes were shut in sheer ecstasy, while his curled tail thumped the deck as a sign of gratitude. The screw blades astern revolved steadily. The sound of the swirling water struck pleasantly upon the ear. Tatiana and Nord were looking north-west. Dark-blue clouds had appeared there, screening the horizon. A swelling purpling sun was rolling slowly down towards them. The clouds caught fire and their flames spread across the sky. There was not a ship in sight. The *Oktyabr*, all alone in a wilderness of sea, bore straight down on the conflagration. There was a tenseness in the air despite the calm. All the sea-birds flew towards the coast with disquieting cries. Suddenly Nord pricked up his ears and stopped thumping his tail.

Borodkin came onto the poop deck on the pretext of checking the log. On his way back he shot a sidelong glance at Tatiana and Nord. The skin was drawn tight across his jaws like that of a man with hard-clenched teeth, and there was a heavy brooding look in his eyes. For a moment it seemed as if he wanted to come up and say something, but he climbed the timber stack and passed on without once looking back.

Suddenly a deep grunt came from somewhere near by. Nord rushed over to the ship's side, bristling and snarling. Tatiana saw a black head with big eyes staring at the ship. Then the whole glossy black body rose out of the water, turned a somersault and vanished immediately into the depths. It was, as Tatiana afterwards found out, a sea lion.

The whole watery waste on the ship's bows was a molten sheet of crimson.

"Get everything properly lashed down!" the Captain commanded from the bridge.

The boatswain and several seamen went over the stack, examining the steel ropes by which the deck cargo was secured. They went about their work grave-faced and silent, as though preparing for an encounter with a strong and dangerous opponent. The second mate, passing the pantrywoman, told her to have all the crockery put away that night.

"Why is that?" she asked him.

"It's going to be a beastly night."

The dying sunset lay in a pool of blood. The Arctic Ocean took on a claret tint, like wine.

Glazunov, in the chartroom, made the following entry in the log-book: "Weather breaking. Mercury falling. Storm brewing."

Then he glanced at the chart. If nothing untoward happened, they would be rounding North Cape in the morning—the northernmost part of Norway. He felt vaguely uneasy about it, and wished they were already on the other side of that granite promontory jutting out over the waters of the Arctic like the snout of a rhinoceros. When he came out onto the bridge the whole western part of the sky was black, as if covered with a thick layer of soot, while the east was atwinkle with stars. A northwester sprang up.

The *Oktyabr* plunged into the Arctic night.

XIV

Tatiana was awakened by violent jolts. From outside came the sounds of heavy thuds and hoarse sighs. Something enormous, bigger than the ship herself, seemed to be trying to clamber onto the deck, then tumbled back

into the sea with a crash. The propeller shaft hummed under the stern. The steamer, shuddering throughout her frame, was tossed from side to side. Tatiana pulled the blanket over her head, but could not fall asleep again. She rolled about on the bunk worse than ever. It was dark in the cabin, and goomy thoughts crept into her head. She reached out her hand and switched on the light. In the light she felt more cheerful. She dressed herself quickly and ran out. In the passage she was flung from one bulkhead to the other. She gripped the rail and began to ascend the ladder. As soon as she put her head outside she was almost stunned by the uproar and the furious wind, which drove stinging salt spray into her face. She thought better of it and descended again. She went into the saloon and sat down in the captain's armchair. The mighty upheaval of the surging deeps was terrifying. On top of this she was seasick and felt ghastly. Her body shivered violently.

Ostrovzorov came into the saloon. He was drenching wet and looked worried.

"Is Nord here, Tatiana Petrovna?"

"No, why?"

"He's disappeared. I've searched the whole ship. Can't find him anywhere."

Tatiana gripped the edge of the table and stared at him in dismay.

"He was on the poop deck with me this evening."

"I saw him at midnight, too. And then I somehow forgot about him. He must have been washed overboard or else someone threw him over."

Ostrovzorov's face suddenly flushed, and, clenching his fists, he added savagely, "The only man who could have done that is Borodkin! If he has, I'll wring the fool's neck for him!"

With these words, he ran out of the saloon.

Tatiana recollected the way Borodkin had glanced at her and the dog on the poop the previous evening. There could be no doubt about it—it was his doing. She pictured poor Nord unsuspectingly trusting himself into the hands of that man and then finding himself overboard. It was so cruel and mean, as all treachery was. Poor dog, how he must have cried, called for help, while the waves tossed and buffeted him about. Perhaps he had suffered and struggled for a whole hour before drowning. Tatiana shuddered. She had a feeling that something still more dreadful was going to happen aboard the ship. Two strong opponents smouldered with hatred against each other, a hatred as blind and furious as the night without. Perhaps, at that very minute, some bloody drama was being enacted on the upper deck. Or something else might happen. Goaded by the jeering crew, maddened by jealousy, Borodkin might suddenly come in here, seize her and drag her up onto the poop to fling her into the waves of the Arctic Ocean. This train of thought banished all seasickness. All that remained was a gnawing, overpowering fear. Tatiana looked at the door with dilated eyes, listening whether anyone was coming. She heard nothing but the pounding of the waves.

She went back to her cabin and locked herself in. The night dragged on endlessly, drearily. Tatiana tossed about on her bunk, yearning wildly for firm ground and repose. She looked round her cabin, now so desolate and cheerless, with a bewildered air. The wash-stand door was banging, but she did not bother to get up and fasten it.

At seven in the morning Tatiana was already up. Conscientious as ever in the performance of her duties, she put on her raincoat and went to the galley with the coffee-pot. To cross the timber stack was no mean feat. The logs shifted and joggled with the rolling motion of the ship, and the supports creaked. At any moment, it seemed, the whole deck cargo would fall to pieces, and she would go

flying overboard together with the timber. An icy north wind was blowing. Tremendous billows with tossing foamy manes heaved beneath a sombre low-hanging sky that almost touched the masts. The wave crests, whipped off by the wind, flew through the air like tufts of blown hay. The driving spray—if it was spray and not rain—hurt her face. The thought of Borodkin and Ostrovzorov preyed on her mind all the time.

Meeting the cook in the galley, she asked him, "Well, Petrovich, is everything all right on board?"

"Not quite," he answered gloomily. "Nord has disappeared. There's going to be trouble now."

"Why?"

"A dog's tears always tell in the end. See this dirty weather? We're going to drink salt water soon through that Borodkin. Look what he's gone and done, the swine! He ought to be chucked overboard himself."

Tatiana made her way aft with difficulty. She was wet through.

The ship's officers came into the saloon one at a time. All looked gloomy, stern-eyed. They hastily ate their meal and washed it down with hot coffee. They spoke little.

"How's the barometer?" the chief engineer asked the second mate.

"Dropping."

"Where are we now?"

"Somewhere off North Cape."

"Don't you think of putting in at some Norwegian port?"

"On the contrary, we're heading away from the land. We're steering North. To run in with such a rocky coast in this weather is pretty risky."

Ostrovzorov came in, and without looking at anybody, gruffly said, "Good morning."

"Did you find Nord?" Tatiana asked him.

"No," he answered gloomily and fell silent.

Tatiana noticed that the lost dog seemed to have inspired everyone with a superstitious fear. It puzzled her. What did the dog have to do with the gale, which started before he disappeared?

No dinner was cooked that day. Tired of sitting in the saloon, Tatiana went into Vasilisa's cabin. The servant was sick. She lay moaning and cursing herself for having signed on for such a long voyage. The sight of her made the pantrywoman feel sick again. She had a loathsome feeling as if she had eaten carrion and often went out in the fresh air. Seamen in oilskins and top-boots huddled round the galley, keeping themselves warm with hot tea.

"Now you know what a real gale is, Tatiana," one of the men said to her.

"Will it last long?" she asked.

"The devil knows. I daresay it'll drop by evening."

Feeling utterly exhausted and wretched, Tatiana stood listening to the pounding of the waves and the howling of the wind, and it seemed to her that the gale was steadily rising, if anything. The *Oktyabr* was taking tremendous plunges. To keep one's balance one had to hold on to something.

Sometimes the watchman came down from the bridge, shivering from the cold, his lips blue. The men would start asking him questions.

"Well, how's the skipper, still going strong?"

"Yes."

"Ah, then we've still got a shot in the locker."

The conversation flagged and the jokes fell flat.

The *Oktyabr* was doing eight knots, running North head to the wind. The heavy deck cargo made her unstable. To alter her course and bring her broadside onto the wind and sea was fraught with the risk of the vessel keeling over like a dead fish belly upwards.

Seas swarmed up the forward stack and made their way amidships through the gaps in the timber. Water

splashed about in the gangway between the engine casing and the cabins. Tatiana looked at the men's top-boots with envy. Her own feet were wet and chilled, and she was shivering throughout her body. The only place where she could warm herself was the engine room. Together with the seamen, she sat there on the grating, gripping it hard. It was smoky and stuffy in there. From above came the tumult of the gale, while below the working engines hissed and sighed. The chief engineer had the watch, and kept a careful eye on each movement of the steel parts. Suddenly a whistle sounded. The chief engineer rushed over to the speaking tube. Tatiana and the sailors craned their necks downwards to hear what the bridge had to say. The chief engineer alternatively put the tube to his ear and shouted into it.

Tearing himself away from it at last, he shouted to the engineman:

"Vikhrov! Tell the stokers to keep the steam going at full pressure if they value their lives."

Then he rushed over to the governor and increased the revolutions.

Presently Heintz, the helmsman, came down from the bridge. All heads turned towards him, staring at his dazed face.

"How are things up there?"

"Pretty rotten," Heintz answered in a hoarse chilled voice.

"What is it?"

"The *Oktyabr* is drifting back onto the rocks. They were sighted when the horizon cleared up for a moment. And nobody knows where we are now...."

He fell silent, and so did the others, crushed by the depressing news. The most hardened seamen shrank at the dreadful thought of what would happen if the engines or the steering gear broke down, or if merely the steering chain got jammed. The *Oktyabr*, at the mercy

of the seas and the wind, would be driven back at a furious speed to be smashed against the jutting rocks like an egg-shell. Everyone was alive to the danger that threatened him, and withdrew into a brooding silence.

Tatiana did not know what to do with herself. It was hot and stuffy in the engine room, and icy cold and wet outside, in the passage-ways. She bore it all, however, without a murmur of complaint. With her, it was always duty first. In the evening she made the coffee and took it up to the Captain on the bridge. The ladder dropped from under her, then shot upwards sickeningly. She gripped the steps instead of the rail, and clambered up like a helpless child. The gale had become a blizzard. The spray flailed her face and snow blinded her eyes. She could scarcely breathe; the very air seemed to have turned solid. When she came up on the bridge she had a startling glimpse of a deep chasm scooped out by the gale yawning in front of the ship. The *Oktyabr* dropped into it, and buried her nose in a mountainous sea. It was two or three seconds, which seemed an eternity, before she reappeared, riding on the heaving crests. The Captain stood alone on the bridge, clad in hooded oilskins. He gripped the rail, a hunched motionless figure with his face pressed against the canvas screen. Tatiana went up to him and said, "I've brought you your coffee, Captain."

Abrikosov did not stir.

Presently he turned his head and stared aft into the grey murk without taking the slightest notice of Tatiana.

She tugged at his sleeve and repeated what she had said.

He stared at her blankly. His grim face told her he had more important things on his mind than coffee. Then he nodded, and the hard line of his mouth under his grey wet moustache relaxed in the faintest of smiles. He took the coffee-pot from her and together they battled their way into the chartroom. The first mate, who was sitting there,

promptly went out onto the bridge. Tatiana sat down on the sofa and watched the Captain. He hastily drank the scalding coffee out of the mug, like a passenger at a railway buffet. His tired face was a livid purple, and his eyelids were swollen. He glanced at the barometer with inflamed eyes; it promised nothing good. The reeling chartroom with its wet deck had a dreary look about it, despite the bright electric light. The gale roared outside and drummed dismally on the roof.

"Thanks for the coffee, my dear. Now let the mate have a warm-up."

Going out, he murmured, "That's the life we have."

Pity for the old man wrung Tatiana's heart. She felt like throwing herself on his neck and kissing him, as she would her father or a man who was saving the ship and lives of the people in her.

Then the first mate had his coffee.

When she came out of the chartroom with him, Borodkin was coming up the ladder. At the sight of her he stopped and scowled. His distorted face looked ghostly in the driving snow. The mate let fly at him.

"Get out! Don't you dare to show your nose here!"

"Why not?" Borodkin said in a surly dogged tone.

"Where is Nord?"

"How do I know. I'm not your dog's keeper."

He went down again, disappearing under the booms.

Tatiana was afraid to go down, and she stood on the bridge, holding on to the rails. In the wheel-house she saw two sailors—Heintz and Brikalov. They were the best helmsmen of the deck crew. None was able to hold the ship to her course as accurately as they were. They took the helm in turns, just the two of them.

Night was closing in. Tatiana pressed her face to the canvas screen on the bridge, and peered out through lowered eyelashes. The gale was blowing with tremendous force. Whirling blasts boarded the vessel with stinging

flicks of spray and snow. It seemed as if it was not the *Oktyabr* that was being tossed about and flung up and down, but the whole Arctic Ocean and the black clouds that were turning over and reeling. Tumbling masses of water surged all round the vessel. Racing seas dashed themselves upon the timber stacks, shaking loose the lashings. The bridge tipped over at such a sharp angle that Tatiana almost hung from the rail by her arms. She could not make out whether the ship was moving forward or not. She could only feel the shuddering of the ship's frame.

During the brief lulls in the storm the seamen came up onto the bridge for "a peep" at the Captain. He stood peering out intently and paid no heed to them. Sometimes he glanced back over his shoulder, his face grimly set, inscrutable. The sailors withdrew, reassured by their glimpse of him.

The gusts steadily increased in violence. The world, reeling in a wild dance, was like hell broke loose. The mournful wailing of the wind in the rigging, the howl in the ventilators, the whistle and moaning in the gaps of the timber stack, the creaking and snapping of the iron hull, the thudding blows of the waves, and the wicked growling of the deeps all mingled in a sinister chorus. Amid this brutal tumult of earth and sky the ghastly thought of those granite rocks astern, lurking somewhere in that reeking murk, was never out of men's minds for a moment. How far off were they? Was the *Oktyabr*, her screws threshing furiously, getting away from them? Or was she, on the contrary, being driven onto them? No one knew. The rock-bound coast with its sheer cliffs and sharp projecting ledges was no longer the cherished landfall of the storm-tossed seaman, but a death-trap. Safety lay in steering clear of it.

Chilled to the marrow, Tatiana decided to go below. Suddenly she stopped dead, feeling that the *Oktyabr*

had taken a tremendous plunge. An enormous sea, tossing matted foaming locks, reared above the ship's bows. Like a mass of molten iron it came crashing down over the fore-deck with all its weight. The whole forward stack was submerged. It was a murderous attack of the gale. The steamer rolled over onto her side like a mortally wounded animal. Never, it seemed, would she rise again. An agonizing second passed, or perhaps more, and then with sharp cracks like rifle-shots, the steel ropes with which the deck cargo was lashed down snapped asunder, and the wooden uprights at the bulwark smashed. The timber stack collapsed, strewing the Arctic waters with logs. The hearts of even the most seasoned seamen turned cold. The next moment the ship's bows, freed of their cargo, leapt upwards. The tip of an upshooting log struck the bridge. The rail crunched within a few feet of where Tatiana was standing, and she was thrown back upon the booms as if by a shell blast, striking the ship's boat. Dazed with pain and overwhelmed by the rush of events, she lost all sense of hazard for the moment. Then all at once the full horror of what had happened dawned upon her. Slowly she crawled back onto the bridge, clutching desperately at the wet deck and breaking her finger-nails. She pulled herself to her feet and gripped the rail with freezing hands. Darkness blotted out the blizzardly world. Thuds and the tinkle of glass could be heard below, where the remaining logs thrown up by the waves were battering the deck structures.

The Captain was shouting something into the ear of the first mate, who shouted something back in reply.

Human voices broke into the uproar of the gale. Where did they come from? What had happened? The first mate rushed over to the booms. Soon he returned, bearing news of fresh disaster. It appeared that both side passages separating the cabins from the engine casing were choked with logs. They were jammed up against the rear stack

and with the vessel having greater draft aft, there was no way of getting rid of them. The cabin doors, opening outwards, were barricaded, and the people in them trapped. All communication between the bridge and the rest of the crew ceased.

To crown all, the ship had a heavy draft aft, while her bows, freed from cargo, had risen, making her drive to leeward still harder. The *Oktyabr* no longer answered her helm. Plunging about in the blind raging murk, she seemed bent on veering round and flinging herself upon the rocks in sheer desperation. It was only the iron will of the Captain and the dexterity of two such fine helmsmen as Brikalov and Heintz that kept her steady in face of the terrible onslaughts of the seas and the wind. But it could not last long. The *Oktyabr* was fighting against overwhelming odds. Something had to be done to lighten the stern, put the ship on an even keel, and free the crew trapped in the cabins.

Fortunately many of the seamen happened to be in the engine room.

Captain Abrikosov shouted down through the speaking tube:

"Send all hands aloft!"

The second engineer answered him:

"The doors are blocked. No one can get out."

"Use the skylight. I must have them up here."

The first to come up onto the bridge was the boatswain, followed by carpenter Khilkov, the Lett Jan and the rest. They stood there grim-faced and silent, gripping whatever they could lay their hands on.

"Unlash the deck cargo aft!" the Captain commanded.

Not a word was said in reply. With the chief mate in the lead, the men clambered aft, lighting their way with electric torches. A formidable task confronted them. To break down the timber stack while standing on it themselves in that raging murk, with the seas trying to board

the ship and tossing her from side to side, was like setting fire to a barrel of gunpowder on which one sat. But there was no alternative. Retreat meant suicide. It was decided to do the job by means of the ship's tackle. The ropes had to be run down and fixed to the cargo lashings in such a way that the latter could be slipped from a distance without the men getting off the booms. The boatswain, the carpenter, and another seaman undertook to do the job. With a rope's end tied round their bodies they crawled over the timber stack with the agility of monkeys, working in drenching torrents of cold water.

Tatiana was still standing on the bridge, clutching the rails. The darkness was absolutely impenetrable. It seemed to her as if they were all crawling about in a black endless cave. It had stopped snowing, but the gale blew with unabated force. Seas swept over the deck and shot up to the bridge. Jelly-fish glimmered in them with a blue light, like errant moons. At times it seemed as if some fabulous monster with dripping roaring jaws and flaming eyes was trying to board the ship. Never in her wildest dreams had Tatiana imagined such a gale. Freezing though she was, her teeth chattering with cold and fear, she could still think of the seamen. A harder, more cruel lot than theirs it was hard to conceive, yet they worked manfully, heroically, to save the ship they so dearly loved.

Seeing the pantrywoman standing there, Abrikosov took her arm and guided her towards the chartroom, trying hard to keep his balance.

The timber stack aft collapsed with a crash.

There was no repose in the chartroom either. Tatiana was flung from side to side. She squeezed herself in between the table and the bulkhead. Here, at least, she could sit without being thrown about.

Several men dragged in Jan the Lett, who had a rope's end tied round him. His eyes had a strange wandering

look and he spat blood. The men laid him down on the bunk.

What followed was like a dream with alternate visions of the Captain and the first mate. Then the third mate came in and announced with an air of bravado:

"Whew, that was a close shave!"

Finally it was reported to the Captain:

"The deck is cleared."

"Good," the Captain answered.

In the morning Tatiana, with the help of Heintz, went down into the servant's cabin. Vasilisa lay prostrate on her bunk, round the edge of which rose a barrier.

"Oh, my darling," she moaned, "I'm dying. It was just awful, my God...."

Tatiana lay down beside her. It was a tight fit, but it kept them from rolling about. The two women lay with arms round each other, determined to die together.

Waves rushed through the passage with a hiss. Water trickled into the cabin under the door. The *Oktyabr* was performing crazy capers, leaping high into the air, then dropping headlong into the roaring ocean.

Tatiana dozed fitfully. As if in a delirium, she heard Vasilisa praying, "Holly Mary, You're a sinner yourself. You know how hard it is to live without sin. Put in a word for me, your slave Vasilisa, before the throne of the Almighty...."

And then, after an attack of gripping seasickness, she would spit gall and swear in the most blasphemous terms.

Suddenly they felt the ship shooting down like a flat-iron.

They sat up simultaneously, holding their breath, a scream trembling in their throats.

It was the *Oktyabr* swinging round to stand upon a new course. This was an extremely dangerous evolution. The steamer heeled over at a sharper angle than the dip-

ping needle could register, and plunged into the seething foam right up to her bridge. Death hung menacingly over the crew for several breathless seconds until the ship righted herself.

Presently the *Oktyabr* was heading in a southwesterly direction, rounding the Norwegian coast. For twelve more hours she was harassed by the seas, and then at last came peace; the anchor chain clattered, bestowing life and rest upon the exhausted seamen.

XV

The ship was laid up in the Norwegian port for two days. Foreign workmen built new ladders in place of those that had been smashed, put new panes in the portholes, and mended the bridge-rails. Fresh water was taken in and the coal-bunkers refilled.

Captain Abrikosov, who had not slept a wink throughout the storm, looked years older. His eyes were sunken and his face was ashy grey. He slept for twenty hours at a stretch, leaving his mates to carry on with the routine. He got up only to eat and drink, then turned in again.

The rest of the crew were younger men, and therefore quicker to recuperate. When they got ashore they went on a roaring spree. Tatiana, who had felt the icy breath of death, now understood the sailors better than before and did not blame them. They were as rough as a storm, gay and lavish of kindness as the sea on a sunny day.

Tatiana herself underwent a gradual change and became infected with the men's rollicking mood.

On the third day the *Oktyabr* put to sea. The barometer needle pointed to fair weather. The sea was becalmed. Amber-coloured dawn kindled astern. The sun rose from behind the hills, building a feast of glory for the eyes. Naive, childlike delight shone softly in the faces of the seamen.

In the afternoon Maxim Borodkin came into Tatiana's cabin. He was shaved and dressed in his best clothes as of old, but his face wore a gloomy expression.

"Good morning, Tatiana Petrovna," he said, stopping in the doorway.

Tatiana became alert.

"Good morning. What is it?"

"I've come to have a talk."

She looked him squarely in the face and demanded:

"Was it you who threw Nord overboard?"

He hesitated, then decided to bluster it out.

"Yes, it was me," he confessed. "And that's nothing to what I'll do if this goes on."

She caught her breath, but otherwise gave no sign, and regarded his freckled face with a hard level look.

"Very well. I don't want to see you again ever. We have nothing to talk about."

Before he came to see her, Borodkin had still entertained some hopes, but the sound of that chill voice spurning him for ever made him realize that all was lost. For a moment he looked at her beseechingly, as though pleading mercy, then his whitish eyes went dead with a sort of dull mercurial glint. He worked his jaws, as though about to say something important, but all he uttered in a strangled voice was, "All right!"

Left alone, Tatiana experienced a feeling of mingled dread and relief. Obviously Borodkin was up to no good, and that frightened her. On the other hand she was glad that he had confessed his crime. Although she disliked him, she could not forget that he had saved her life, and so she had been rather reluctant to break with him. But now she had a good excuse. How could she feel anything for a man who could so cruelly kill an innocent dog?

All the more strongly and irresistibly did she feel drawn to the wireless operator. Neither fear nor threats

could stop her. Her heart, which had known twenty-two springtimes of life, now beat only for Ostrovzorov.

The *Oktyabr* was heading south-west. It grew warmer every day. The sky was a lapping flood of tender blue, the sea a luminous vastness belted by a sweeping horizon. Everything was wrapped in deep silence and peace. It was hard to imagine a storm ever rising and playing sad havoc with men again. The screwed-up eyes of the seamen were lusty with the sheer joy of life that sparkled in the blue spaces.

Tatiana spent all her spare time in the wireless cabin.

Thirty odd pair of eyes watched her and Ostrovzorov. Everyone peered into her or his face, trying to guess how far their intimacy had gone. It was now the talk of the forecastle, the stokehold and the officers' saloon. Men were tipful of excitement and curiosity, as if they were all in love themselves. Some were sure that the affair had come to a head, that the pantrywoman already belonged to the wireless operator, others remained unconvinced, saying:

"When she stays the night with him, or he with her, then you can call it a go."

"He's a smart lad, that wireless-man, but then she's got plenty of character too. Knows her own mind pretty well."

Everyone fawned upon Ostrovzorov and made a fuss of him; men pinned all their hopes on him. They praised Tatiana to the skies in front of him.

"That pantrywoman of ours beats the band. She's a peach!"

"That's the kind of woman a man would lay down his life for."

"You bet!" carpenter Khilkov cried with enthusiasm and, without looking at the wireless operator, began talking to his mates. "We don't appreciate beauty, boys. When you really get to understand it, though, it's a great joy. Let me explain. Take some American multimillionairess,

say. She's just wallowing in riches—you couldn't count them no more than you could the sands at the bottom of the sea. But when it comes to looks—the best she could do with a mug like hers is to crawl into a hole and pull the hole in after her. Now take Tatiana Petrovna, say, and hold her up to that ugly sufferer, and ask her, 'Look here, would you like to swap looks with this one? How much will you cough up?' Why, she'd give half her fortune, that American would, I swear! And wouldn't think twice about it. D'you realize what that means, lads? It means that nature, as they say these days, has come across with a fortune for our Tatiana Petrovna to the tune of five hundred million rubles. How d'you like that?"

"Bravo, Artamosha! You've squared the accounts right smart!" the sailors cried.

The wireless operator listened to this talk with a happy smile.

Everyone went out of his way to be nice to the pantrywoman. The men joked with her, laughed, called her respectfully by her name and patronymic. They were prepared to do anything for her, so long as she lived up to their hopes. There was hardly a man in the crew who was not anxious to see her take up with the wireless operator. Day in day out they displayed an amazing ingenuity towards that end. And she, young and inexperienced in the world's ways, surrendered to the tide and let it sweep her along without resistance.

The *Oktyabr* had entered the North Sea.

When sunset faded the pantrywoman went into the wireless cabin. Ostrovzorov was lying on the sofa in his ear-phones. He jumped up when she came in and smiled a welcome.

"I'm glad you've come, Tatiana Petrovna. They're broadcasting a special programme from Newcastle for seamen. Would you like to hear it?"

"With pleasure," Tatiana said.

He fitted another pair of ear-phones over her head and sat down next to her on the sofa. Presently she heard a voice speaking in English. Ostrovzorov translated for her.

"Miss Crayton is going to sing, accompanied by the piano."

A slow melody struck upon her ears, and a few seconds later a woman's voice wove itself into it. Tatiana was thrilled. The music seemed to be flowing in the air right next to her, over the roof of the wireless cabin, instead of coming from somewhere hundreds of miles off shore. The tune was a sad one. It seemed as if it was not a woman but a sea-gull singing as it hovered over the ship; singing and sobbing, mourning a dead friend. The song came to an end amid a burst of applause. Tatiana clapped her hands, too, radiant and excited.

There were other tunes, too: humorous songs, comic scenes, a band. Then a baritone started singing. Ostrovzorov pretended to translate the words, but they were mostly his own.

"Since I have met you my heart knows no peace. You are all the world to me. You are the light of my eyes. Come to me, my beloved...."

Tatiana snuggled up to Ostrovzorov almost without being aware of it. The rich voice of the baritone singing somewhere ashore, the sounds of the piano, and the voice of her friend went to her head like wine. His arm slipped round her waist and she let it stay there. Her golden eyes grew soft and swimming. A glance at them told Ostrovzorov all he wished to know. A woman's heart was like a tide that had its ebb and flow. And this was the flood-tide of Tatiana's feelings. He guessed as much and switched off the light.

At that moment the Lett Jan, now recovered from his bruises, was standing watch on the booms near the wireless cabin. He stood leaning with his chest against the

ship's boat, smoking a pipe and gazing at the sky, which was studded with brilliant stars. The night was serene and bracingly cool. Suddenly a low moan coming from the direction of the wireless cabin broke in upon his revery. He turned, went up closer to the door and listened. When he came away his astonishment knew no bounds. "Well, I never!" he whispered to himself. "And we duffers thought she'd been carrying on with Borodkin. . . ."

The next day there was not a man on board but wanted to have a look at Tatiana. All manner of excuses were invented for that purpose. Her face, pale and shrinking, with downcast eyes, told its own tale. All were pleased and gratified. At the same time everyone immediately cooled towards the successful lover, and some even eyed him with animosity.

Borodkin ceased to be an object of ridicule. He had a dark brooding look. It was all too clear that he had reached that stage of despair when a man is no longer answerable for his actions. One could never tell what he would do.

It came as a shock therefore when one of the crew told his mates one day with a startled air of mystery:

"I saw him get a knife out of his box. He tried the edge with his finger and put it away in his pocket. He's got murder in his eye, the devil!"

"I wonder who's going to get it?" someone asked.

"The wireless-man, most likely."

"He may stick that knife into someone else while he's at it."

The men looked at each other in dismay.

"I shouldn't be surprised. The fellow's daft. Went and chucked Nord overboard. What did that poor dog do to him, I ask you? Imagine a fellow getting a knife stuck into his ribs when he's least expecting it!"

The news trickled into the saloon, and there, too, it caused anxiety.

A sense of impending disaster hung in the air. Everyone was on the rack, expecting the affair to come to a tragic head at any moment. Many were sorry they had ever started the dangerous game. Some cursed women—it was they who were to blame for all the troubles on earth, and still more, at sea. The anxious suspense grew apace and began to tell on men's nerves.

Borodkin claimed more and more of the crew's attention. He brooded in solitude and spoke to no one. Sometimes his freckled face took on a grim, solemn look, and his sunken whitish eyes lit up with an ugly glitter. At such moments he looked sinister.

In the crew's quarters the stokers kept the door of their compartment on the hook at night, and in the other compartment where the deck-hands lived together with Borodkin, no one got any real sleep. After talking it over among themselves they decided to keep a secret watch of their own below deck. The man whose turn it was sat through the night at the table ostensibly reading a book.

Borodkin, in his clothes, lay on the bunk. His eyes were always open. When did he sleep? If he did doze off it was only for a few minutes, and then he would moan and gnash his teeth.

When the ship anchored in the English port, life on board relaxed its tension. Borodkin spent all his time ashore, drinking hard in the company of loose women. His mates willingly stood watch for him, saying, "Let him have a good time. Maybe it'll bring the lad round a bit."

While the *Oktyabr* was coaling Tatiana had the time of her life. She went to town now only with Ostrovzorov. They never missed an evening at some music-hall or other.

She came back to the ship happy and elated.

XVI

The *Oktyabr* was bound for home, whose far-flung shores lay beyond two seas. In the day-time she made heavy weather of it. A black squall attacked the ship, and the crested buffeting seas swarmed up over her hull. She shipped tons of water over the fore-deck and shuddered throughout her frame when the billows swept over her like a rushing mountain torrent. By the evening, however, a halcyon calm fell upon the sea. The sky was thick with clouds, which ran out like dough. Night fell, wrapping the sea in impenetrable darkness as if with some enormous animal's skin. The ship kept steadily upon her course, rocking smoothly on the long swell. There was a deep hush all round, but for the low mutterings of the surging deeps, which sounded like the ravings of a sick man. The watchmen on the bridge kept a sharp look-out. The darkness, and a sense of the perils that always lurked in it, kept them wide awake. The two top-lights of a vessel twinkled ahead, and then a red light swam into view. That meant that the steamers had passed clear of each other on their portsides. Presently the lights dropped astern and vanished.

A sailor stood at the wheel in the dark wheel-house. The only light came from the binnacle with its electric lamp shining through the hood. The helmsman stared hard at the compass-card in the bowl. It was Maxim Borodkin. He tried to keep his mind on the steering, but all the time Tatiana stood before his eyes. She had been faithless, had jilted him. And it was all the fault of that wireless operator Ostrovzorov, who had come between them and their love. The vision of her sitting in the wireless cabin clasped in the arms of her new lover suddenly became intensely clear. Borodkin quivered. A mist swam before his eyes, and the marks and figures on the com-

pass-card flickered and crawled about like black little insects. He gripped the wheel harder, as if he had his hands on the throat of his rival. He had a wild impulse to rush down to the deck at once, that very minute, seize a crow-bar and smash down the door of the wireless cabin.

"What course are you steering?" a stern voice sounded in his ear.

Borodkin glanced round with a start. The broad-shouldered figure of the first mate loomed, swaying, out of the darkness. He had just finished his entries in the log-book and had come out of the chartroom to glance at the compass.

"You were ordered to keep the ship steady on 57 south-east, Comrade Borodkin," he shouted angrily, "and you've canted round almost in the opposite direction. Do you understand what danger you're exposing the ship and the whole crew to? It's a crime! I'll report it!"

The bell struck in the forecastle. Borodkin, deaf to the mate's angry speech, started to count the strokes. It dawned on him that it still wanted an hour till midnight. Then why had they relieved him of the watch before it was over? Seaman Heintz, who had been called aloft together with the boatswain and the trade-union organizer, took over the wheel. The mate was still simmering and shouting.

"What if there had been any rocks near, or reefs? D'you know what might have happened?"

"What made you alter the ship's course without permission?" the trade-union organizer demanded.

The offender drew a hand across his clammy face.

"I didn't do it on purpose. I don't know how it happened."

He picked his way gingerly down the bridge, as though he were afraid to stumble.

"The lad's not himself," the boatswain remarked. "He's likely to make a lot of trouble. There's a smell of blood in the air."

It was light in the wireless cabin. Ostrovzorov sat at the table in front of his gleaming apparatuses, his face with its high forehead and trimmed moustache looking keen and efficient. He was listening to the signals that came from hundreds and thousands of miles away, sifting the mass of information that filled the vast expanses of sea for items of interest that could be entered into his log. At such times his head, with ear-phones strapped under his chin, would be bent over the open book.

All of a sudden Ostrovzorov became alert. His eyes flew open as though he had seen some ghastly vision. With a trembling left hand he quickly turned the knob, and instantly there distinct letters—"S O S"— imprinted themselves upon his brain, as if cast out of some shining metal. Some ship, lost amid the vast wilderness of sea and murk, was in distress, calling for help.

Tatiana came into the wireless cabin. The bloom of youth shone in her cheeks and her golden eyes were radiant.

"It's so dark up on deck!" she said cheerfully. "You'd think we were moving over the bottom of the sea. I was even afraid to come here. Still at work, darling?"

She put her hand on his shoulder and wanted to kiss him.

"Leave me alone," he said, and pushed her away roughly. She had never known his voice to sound so cold.

Tatiana drew back dismayed. Tears started to her eyes.

"Grisha, what's the matter with you?"

She steeled herself for his reply, ready to drop on the lurching deck. But he was strangely silent, alien. The pencil leapt over the form he was writing on. At that

moment Tatiana did not exist for him. All wireless stations were silent, listening to that single one which screamed out its message of distress. The call was from the *Stroller*, an Englishman. The ship was homeward bound with a cargo of combustibles in her holds—six thousand tons of petrol. A fire had broken out on board. All measures had been taken to put it out, but the situation was desperate. There followed the ship's bearings, and then the message was repeated over again.

Ostrovzorov sprang away from the table.

"English ship in distress!" he cried.

Tatiana started.

"What's happened?"

She ran out of the cabin, following Ostrovzorov who rushed up onto the bridge.

Presently the loud voice of the first mate was heard in the dark:

"Watchman! Ask the Captain up on the bridge at once! All hands on deck!"

In a few minutes the whole crew was up.

In the chartroom the first mate was calculating the distance. He looked up at the Captain.

"The *Stroller* is about seven or eight miles off," he said. "It must be the ship we met recently."

"Good," Captain Abrikosov said quietly. "We'll be the first on the spot then."

The lurching *Oktyabr* cleaved her way steadily through the swell. With the exception of those who were on duty in the engine room and the stokehold, all the hands were mustered on the poop deck. They stood in anxious silence. Eyes strained painfully to pierce the darkness, but it was as impenetrable as a black velvet pall.

"It's as dark as in the belly of a shark," someone said.

Then suddenly a shout went up:

"There it is! Look!"

The glow of a fire appeared over the bows. It steadily grew and expanded, tearing the veil of darkness. A reddish pillar of smoke rose, swaying, into the sky. The top of it flattened out and spread in curling wreaths. Presently the silhouette of the ship leapt out. Shadows flickered around it like the transparent wings of gigantic dragon-flies.

Captain Abrikosov bent over the speaking tube and shouted down into the engine room:

"Give her the gun!"

The *Oktyabr* raced to the rescue of the Englishman at top speed. The crew stared ahead with bated breath. Imagination piled up horror upon horror. The very air seemed to have turned colder and shivery.

"Rig the hoses!" Captain Abrikosov commanded.

Several men tumbled down from the bridge with a clatter of feet on the ladder steps.

"See whether the pumps are in order," he then said to the second mate. "Take charge of the firemen."

Ostrovzorov was at his apparatus again, listening to the appeals of the burning ship. The third mate ran between the bridge and the wireless cabin, transmitting the messages. The plight of the *Stroller* was reported to the Captain at regular intervals. The last report stated that the crew had not been able to put the fire out. "The petrol will soon catch fire. We are lowering the boats. This is the end. W.T.-man Barker."

That was the last message which had been received from the *Stroller.*

Presently tongues of flame shot skyward. They appeared on the middle deck, then spread, snaking, fore and aft. The flames kept rising, turning the night into dawn. The swell glinted redly and came to life with dancing fiery blinks.

"Hell, we're too late!" one of the men murmured.

"No chance of saving them now," another added.

After a while a boat could be seen lying alongside the burning ship. The last two men were lowering themselves into it by ropes.

"What the devil are they dawdling for!" the first mate growled.

Captain Abrikosov stood on the bridge, leaning against the rail. He was watching the boat through his binoculars. The lurid glow was reflected on his face.

"Lower the storm-ladder!" he boomed.

"Aye, aye, sir!" came the answer from the deck.

The boat pushed off from the side of the *Stroller*. The men at the oars pulled for dear life, but the boat seemed to be getting clear of the ship very slowly. Rocking on the swell, it looked like a white ten-legged insect crawling over the sandy dunes. Simultaneously another boat on the other side of the blazing ship was sighted. It was pulling away from the ship, apparently unaware that assistance was close at hand.

The *Oktyabr* swung across the path of the first boat. The distance between them swiftly diminished.

"Stand by with the line!" the first mate commanded.

The flames on the *Stroller* mounted higher. It seemed as if she had grown a fiery mane, and suddenly, like some fabulous sea-dragon, would dart across the sea amid a shower of golden sparks. An immense, overturned bowl of dark-brown smoke hung, swaying, over her. The blazing ship rocked on the swell, and her two masts were like the fingers of a giant lazily wagging at the sky.

The engine-room telegraph clanged under the captain's hand and the hand moved over to "Stop." The boat was now quite close. The *Oktyabr* turned broadside to it. A shout came from the bridge to the men in the boat:

"Catch the line!"

The boat drew alongside the rescuing ship, and the Englishmen began to climb on board up the storm-ladder. Carpenter Khilkov and Maxim Borodkin gripped them

under the arms and hoisted them up. The foreigners stood on the deck in a huddled knot, officers and men together. Some had tumbled straight out of their bunks and were in their underclothes, barefooted and bare-headed. Their faces were flushed and excited, covered with soot and streaked with sweat. They looked round wildly, as though they could scarcely believe they were safe at last on board a Russian steamer.

While the rest of the survivors were climbing up on deck, Captain Abrikosov was about to give orders for "easy ahead" in order to pick up the men in the second boat, when the unexpected happened.

A blast of hot air suddenly struck the *Oktyabr*, and the men on board recoiled and staggered. Some, with a queer convulsive movement, managed to keep their balance, others fell head over heels. It seemed to everyone as if the deeps themselves had snorted like some monster shaking the sea. Something thundered past into the black void. A blinding flash sent the darkness reeling back. Where the *Stroller* had stood there were now golden matted locks of flame leaping upward to the black clouds. Fiery fountains gushed all round. The petrol-flooded, sea was on fire, and the flames spread swiftly across the running swell.

The *Oktyabr* was trapped in a flaming ring. The engine-room telegraph clanged, passing the order below to put on full speed.

"Helm hard astarboard!" came the sharp voice of the Captain.

"Astarboard, sir!" the helmsman answered in a high note.

The *Oktyabr* swung slowly to starboard and began to pick up speed. Then once more the command rang out:

"Ease off!"

"Ease off, sir!"

Frantic screams came from the remaining men in the boat alongside the ship. The men standing on the deck

were silent. They looked at the flaming sea with horror-filled eyes. The whole expanse of it was a roaring cataract of fire whose scorching breath scalded men's bodies and filled their lungs with acrid fumes.

"Don't stand there like confounded images! Turn to! Rig the pumps! Get the fire hoses out!" Captain Abrikosov yelled. His voice now sounded stronger, as if it were coming from a megaphone, and his gestures were commanding. He still stood on the bridge, his figure aglow from head to foot in the lurid reflection. There was a certain grim and wrathful majesty about his whole figure, like that of a pirate ready to smash the skull of anyone who did not bend to his will.

The words of command sobered the crew, brought them out of their stupefaction. All hands jumped smartly to the orders, realizing that the most resolute action was needed if they were to save their lives. The Englishmen huddled under the bridge.

The Captain's commands fell sharp and crisp:

"Hose all the upper parts of the ship!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" came the answer from the deck.

"Play the hose on one another!"

"Aye, aye!"

"Close all the portholes!"

The pumps started working. The sailors swung the hoses round, playing them on all sides—on the ship's boats, the booms, the tarpaulin hatch covers, the chart-room and the wheel-house. The pressure was so great that the water spurted out of the hose pipes with a hiss and crackle. The crystal jets pierced the illumined air and broke into sparkling rainbow-coloured sprays. The men who came under them squirmed and spun round, spluttering and hiding their faces. The ship's crew looked like children who were having a lark.

The horse-faced boatswain stood on the poop, looking queerly off balance, his wide mouth stretched in a grin.

He repeated all the Captain's commands with some cheering addition of his own, "Go it like blazes, damn your bloody eyes!"

Throwing up flaming seas, the *Oktyabr* stormed along like an infuriated beast. Yellow tongues clung to the iron hull, and crept up to the bulwark with a crackle of oil paint. The fire-hoses were played upon them from the deck. The fire drew a current of air, and a sportive breeze piped up with a glowing flurry. Writhing flames danced over the ruffled surface, shrinking in the troughs of the sea and leaping into turbulent life on the wave-crests. It was as if the ship were surrounded by millions of fiery dragons, who snooped about in all directions, fell back, reared and threatened to board the vessel. The *Oktyabr* crushed them mercilessly under her iron hulk. Astern, in the swirls of the ship's wake, the petrol blazed up in lightning flashes and glittering stars, while farther out, where the *Stroller* had been, a gyrating column of fire shot up into the sky, unfurling orange-coloured sheets of silk. The clouds above it were smoking-hot, and looked as if they would come toppling down in fragments like the roof of a blazing building.

The men were exhausted by the heat. The poisonous fumes filled their lungs, stung their eyes, and fuddled their brains. Their knees shook. They had to exert every ounce of strength to continue their fight with the flames.

Another Englishman clambered up the storm-ladder. He had fought his way through the flames. He was a tall, spare man, clad only in his underclothes, which were still burning when he came on deck. Groaning loudly and waving his arms, he hopped and spun round on the deck, half-mad with pain. Covered with burns, his face swollen and his head singed clean as though it had been scalped, he looked like some ghastly apparition from the deeps.

"That's our chief engineer!" came an exclamation from the knot of Englishmen standing under the bridge.

The boatswain caught himself and yelled:

"Play the hose on him, the hose!"

A powerful jet struck the engineer in the face and knocked him down. He turned several somersaults on the deck like an acrobat, then got to his feet again. Two Englishmen caught him up under the arms and led him away like a blind man. The skin came away from his bloated face in dirty shreds.

The pantrywoman, who was standing on the poop next to the storm-ladder, suddenly screamed and pointed aft.

"The boat has broken adrift!"

Everyone looked round.

The second boat was caught up in the swirl raised by the ship's powerful propeller blades. Enveloped in flames and spinning like mad, it swiftly dropped astern. After charring the boat's sides, the flames crept inboard and attacked the men cowering there. One of them leapt wildly to his feet, waving an oar, as though threatening the retreating ship. The next moment he fell headlong into the sea, his legs describing an arch.

The blazing boat vanished in an instant.

The *Oktyabr* was now out of danger. She was cruising round the edge of the wide flaming circle, keeping at a distance of two cable's length. Several binoculars on the bridge were trained upon the illuminated sea. The ship continued her search for the second boat without any hope of success.

Other vessels, which had come up in answer to the *Stroller*'s signals, began to loom through the darkness.

Meanwhile the survivors were being attended to in the saloon of the *Oktyabr*. The third mate, with the aid of several of the crew, dressed the burned body of the chief engineer, who lay moaning and gritting his teeth. The seamen and the ship's staff dipped into their dunnage to

clothe the Englishmen. Maxim Borodkin brought his best suit, thrust it shyly into the hands of one of the Englishmen as if it were some worthless junk he had no further use of, and hastened away. Tatiana, pale and shaken, busied herself at the table making tea for the unexpected guests. The Englishmen squeezed the hands of their rescuers, smiled gratefully and related details of the horrors they had lived through.

The dying fire began to break up into isolated patches. Wandering flames spread over the watery prairie like a herd of fiery buffaloes. The choppy sea kept rounding them up. It twinkled with dancing lights, like shoals of frisking golden fish flicking luminous tails above the surface, then everything was extinguished. The *Stroller* alone continued to blaze like a funeral pile. A whole fleet of ships had gathered—French, British, Norwegian, Dutch and German—but they had come too late to be of any help to their perishing sister.

A boat called out from one of the British steamers came alongside the *Oktyabr*. An officer, who introduced himself as the first mate, came up on the deck. He was a stout man of medium height in full dress uniform with golden braid. He took over the survivors, and when they were all lowered into the boat, thanked Captain Abrikosov and wished him good-bye.

The *Oktyabr* swung round to stand on her former course and awoke the echoes of the glowing night with her victorious hoot. Gathering way upon her, she steamed past the foreigners, who stood looking at her from the bridges and sides, and was swallowed up in the darkness.

Most of the watch off duty trailed back to their bunks.

Tatiana sat in the wireless-cabin, waiting until her friend was finished with his duties. She felt sad and soul-sick, and her golden eyes were clouded with pain. Ostrovzorov was busy calling his home port and took no notice of her. The dynamo whined nervously, and the wire-

less apparatus transmitted news of the terrible disaster across thousands of miles of sea to the Union of Soviet Republics.

Maxim Borodkin was standing on the forecastle head, leaning against the winch. He was gazing out into the impenetrable darkness. In the face of what he had seen and experienced during the fire, his own trouble dwindled in significance. The pangs of jealousy were now deadened. He did not want to think any more of either Tatiana or his rival. Let them be happy, if there was such a thing as happiness in this world. All he wanted was to get back to the home port as quickly as possible. Once there, he would get a transfer to another ship to roam the distant seas and try his luck once more.

The dark chasms outboard sighed mysteriously.

1923-24

SUBMARINERS

When a man goes to his death the least he can ask is what for.

WAGNER

A woman, like death, is inescapable.

GORKY

OUR submarine is a tiny string in the thundering concert of war. She is now lying in harbour, taking it easy. In a way, I love her—if only for the hairbreadth escapes we had in her during our cruises. Yet, at the first opportunity, I try to get away from her. My anguished soul craves peace, and that I can find only here, by the deserted sea-shore.

A balmy breeze has got under the wide collar of my sailor's uniform and tickles my body. I lie on the smooth shingle, smiling up at the cloud-flecked sky, the sun and the sea. The waves are murmuring at my feet. What are they saying? Who knows? Perhaps they are telling how they have been wrestling with the boisterous winds, or how hot it is below the equator, or how freely they roam the immense wide spaces. A haze of smoke and dust hangs over the town, sprawling on the wide plateau amid the sparse vegetation. But here it is sunny and cheerful, and my heart is blithe as the morn in tropical seas.

I lost my parents at a very early age. I was only eight when I found myself alone in a big seaport without a friend in the world. No one but an uncle, who kept a wretched little shop. I helped him to sell rotten sausage

and what was known in the trade as "dog's delight"—tripe, liver and lungs.

Our lodgings were on the outskirts of the town. Here, in squalor and misery, lived the ragged starving poor. In the main streets was wealth and luxury. In the shops—all one's heart could desire. My infant eyes were dazzled, my head whirled.

But what attracted me most was the sea. The size of it took my breath away. Nothing but water all round. Sometimes it was swathed in blue satin. The sun smoothed out the creases with hands of fire and worked gold designs upon it. It was impossible to tear one's eyes from it. Then a breeze would suddenly spring up. There was something boyishly mischievous in its behaviour. It loved to play pranks, and was up to all kinds of tricks. It would drive up so many clouds that the whole sky would be plastered with them, and then start beating the surface of the sea with invisible wings. The gold designs would disappear. Everything would be rumpled, dishevelled, the air filled with a roar and boom. I would then gaze at the sea with fearful curiosity. Its deep heaving caverns turned inside out. The hungry waves looked like so many demons. Grey and shaggy, they tumbled about over the ruffled surface with wicked laughter.

What wild fancies come into a child's head!

My uncle, who was a hard drinker, very soon went broke. He fixed me up as a guide to a blind musician who shared the same lodgings with us.

"Do as he tells you. He's a good old man," my uncle admonished me, and took himself off to another town.

The old man, I remember, wore a shabby checked suit and a broad-brimmed straw hat. His face was like the picture of Apostle Paul painted in our church. People called him Vlas Vlasovich.

At night I took him round the houses which had red lights burning outside. He played the fiddle. In his skilled

hands the instrument sang, and sobbed, and laughed, and produced such trills that the larks might well have envied them. At such times I really loved him. The painted girls loved him, too.

"Vlas Vlasovich! Let's have another! Something sad and tender," they would say.

While the blind fiddler played I went round with the hat.

The men one met there! Elderly, respectable fathers of families and beardless youths, almost boys. There was a continual coming and going. They haggled with the women and talked bawdy with a relish.

The painted girls treated me in different ways.

At one of the red-light houses there was a woman Lolya who annoyed me very much. She was a big, full-bosomed woman with thick lips and a gruff voice like a man's. Whenever she saw me she would say:

"Come on, snotty nose, I'll teach you the game for fifty kopeks. . . ."

I could have cried for shame. I looked gratefully at Grusha, an elderly seedy-looking woman. She always took my part.

"You shameless hussy! What do you want to spoil the child for?" she would say.

Grusha with her high cheek-bones was ugly, and the men only took her when the other girls were engaged. She was in the mistress's bad books, because she was not earning her keep. But I liked her more than I did any of the others. I liked the way she smiled. She asked me who I was, where I came from, and how I was living. Often she gave me presents. I got used to her. We became good friends. Once she invited me to her room. I couldn't very well refuse, and I went along, thinking fearfully—what's going to happen now? Grusha locked the door from the inside, then kissed me and started to cry.

"My poor little orphan! You're all alone in the world, and so am I. It's hell here. I'm sick of the life, curse it. I'll run away from here soon. Would you like to be a son to me? We'll start life together—just you and I. It'll be wonderful. . . ."

There was such loving kindness in her speech. I agreed.

A few days later we moved into a basement room. Life began to settle down. True, Grusha continued to visit the pubs and public baths, but she tried to keep it a secret from me. She took loving care of me, taught me to read and write. She called me her son, and I called her Mother.

And so we lived for over a year.

One day in the autumn she did not come home. The next day I was called out to the hospital. I went, trembling with agitation. And when I saw her, pale and moaning, I broke down.

She was dying. She came to herself for a moment and recognized me.

"Semyon, my poor boy. . . . I've been knifed. . . . How will you live without me?. . ."

Her last words were branded in my heart with red-hot irons.

Two days after Grusha's death the dour yard-keeper came into my room. He glanced round, then threw out, as if dropping a weight off his shoulders:

"Now then, young cub, get out of here quick."

"Where am I to go?"

"Where you like. It's none o' my business."

Life suddenly struck me as being a terrifying affair. I might have been surrounded by crocodiles, like those I had seen on pictures, instead of human beings.

As to what happened to me after that is a story the sea alone can tell. For it was the sea, salty and sweet-smelling, that wrested me from the soul-destroying clutches of the waterside slums.

Memory recaptures other scenes—the fisheries at which I had worked. It had been devilishly hard work. But what could a youth feel at eighteen? My love-meetings with blue-eyed Maryika, the fisher-girl, poured fresh courage into my heart. Love's bright dawn eased the burden of life. I knew my first love with that girl, a love pure and sweet as fragrant honey.,

My thoughts are recalled by a protracted hoot. It is the voice of the submarine *Trigla*. Back from her cruise she is now entering the harbour. I am glad she has come home safely. I have special reason to be, for it was in her that I got my baptism of fire.

I was assigned to the *Trigla* after completing a course of training for torpedo-man. Never shall I forget my first experiences. Outwardly the boat resembled a long cigar. No superstructures except the conning-tower, two periscopes, two guns and a wireless mast. Inside I was struck by the mass of gears, instruments and apparatuses. They were everywhere—below, overhead, and along the sides. Machines, pipes, wires, ventilators, pumps, valves, levers, cocks and other things too numerous to be listed. It was bewildering. And each thing had its important use, its hidden meaning. It was a kind of monster with a very intricate organism, the creature of man's wild fancy.

Then my first underwater cruise. The roadstead. A calm cloudy day. The boat was in diving trim. The hatch had been closed. It was as if a gravestone had been lowered over us. The words of command, heavy as leaden weights, dropped into the boat from the conning-tower:

"Flood main ballast!"

There was a noise fore and aft like the working of a water-mill. The iron hull shuddered. The air roared in my ears. Sputtering and gasping, the *Trigla* slowly sank to the bottom. The living world had gone from us.

It seemed hopelessly remote, beyond reach for ever. We were in the mysterious briny deeps. I felt as though I were standing on the edge of life and death. Cold terror seeped into all the pores of my body.

Of course, nothing happened, and we safely surfaced. But that experience had left a deep furrow in my heart, like the track of a plough across a field.

Now I am serving in another boat—the *Murena*, which is the stame type as the *Trigla*.

How many more cruises am I destined to make? How many more incredible adventures will I have? Perhaps my earthly career will end in these very waters....

Who cares? My weary soul is now at rest.

I am sitting by the sea-shore all alone. A tiny dot on the fringe of the gilded vastness of the sea. This shining immensity is all my heart craves for. The distance loses itself in a sparkling splendour. The waves splash softly, kissing my bare feet with foamy lips. My ears are filled with a silvery tinkle—it is the sea, pouring out its fairy-tale without ever ending it.

After each cruise we leave a guard on the *Murena* and move over to the *Amur*, a large transport, which serves as our depot ship. She has a complement of five submarine boats, moored alongside the quay.

We spend these intervals between cruises relaxing. There is little work to do. The crew sleep, eat, stroll about in town, and make hustling love to the women. Our depot ship is like a night-club; you can often hear sounds of music there—a piano in the wardroom, an accordion, a guitar or a mandolin in the mess deck. The men play dominoes and swear horribly. Some go in for reading books, preferably thrillers. Serious books are seldom read. Those who read them are made fun of.

"Oh, come off it, you'll soon be sweating in hell just

the same. And it doesn't make a scrap of difference down there whether you're educated or ignorant."

I had just woken up, but continued to lie on the bunk. Four bells struck on the *Amur*. The westering sun threw strips of light into the open portholes. It was hot.

My neighbour on the right, wireless warrant-officer Zobov lay on his stomach, poring over a book of physics. From time to time he jotted down some mathematical equations on a sheet of paper. A sunbeam shone on the bald patch on the top of his head.

"Aren't you sick of that stuff yet?" I said to him.

Zobov looked up at me with tired eyes. His wide nostrils twitched as though he were sniffing me over.

"A good book airs your brains," he answered.

My other neighbour on the left, motor-man Zaleikin, who was as sportive and mischievous as a porpoise, retorted, "And good music does your heart good." He stretched the crimson bellows of his accordion, and sang mockingly:

> There my darling sweetheart goes
> With a pimple on his nose.
> He's the funniest I know;
> I don't know why I love him so!

Zaleikin's freckled face seemed to dance to the music, and his roguish eyes were brimming with fun.

"You'll go clean bald, Zobov, unless you ease up on those books," I said.

"It's what you've got inside the noddle that counts and not what you've got on top of it."

A little way off sat electrician Sidorov, holding forth to a small audience of his own:

"I ran into that nun in the street. Collecting money for the church, she was. Wasn't hard to look at either—a brunettish bit, you know. Black from the keel up, like she'd been hauled out of a chimney. I dropped half a

ruble in the cup. She squeezed my hand, and her eyes went snip-snap, shooting regular broadsides. I invited her into a barroom. But she hung back, said it was awkward, you know. I had a job dragging her into a private room. On the table we had a bottle of stingo with ham and eggs. Then I started the kissing act. You should have seen that nun—went all over soft, and began to pray, 'Oh, Lord, forgive my sinful soul.' Then she threw her arms round my neck like a noose, and whispered, 'What a hot lad you are, dearie, God bless you.' "

The men around Sidorov laughed excitedly.

Sounds of laughter came from the other side of the vessel, where two submarine crews were chaffing each other.

"You only go to sea to lie about on the bottom and take it easy."

"It's you who polish the sea floor when you go out cruising."

"At least we sank two transports, but what have you done?"

"Two pig troughs, you mean."

"If your commander fell in with the enemy he'd have the heeby-jeebies."

"And what about your commander? When he has to give orders during a fight he just stands there picking his nose."

Work in the harbour was going at full blast amid a din and clatter.

I had long since wearied of this daily jog trot.

I got out my writing-book with verses. But I did not feel like writing. I decided to show my poetry to Zobov—he was the cleverest man in the crew.

"Did you write this?"

"Yes."

Zobov read two or three verses, then returned the book to me.

"I've had enough."

"Don't you like them?"

"Dull stuff."

He yawned with a sort of whine, showing his big fangy mouth. I almost hated him at that moment.

"You're a wireless sap, Zobov!"

But he was imperturbable. In the drawling tone of a mentor he let fall indolently:

"No doubt you sweated and slaved over those verses, but real talent should stick out of a man like the tail out of a peacock."

I snatched my cap and rushed out like a scalded cat to ask the officer in charge for shore leave.

That evening I had had no intention of going anywhere. But, by chance, I had shown Zobov my book of verses, and that had led to a new acquaintance, a new offshoot in my soul.

The wind was strengthening. The trees murmured peevishly as though envying the clouds, which were sailing through the sky to some unknown destination.

Here, in this wood outside the town, I met a young woman. She was of medium height, but as quick as a Madagascar lizard. Her brows were two half-moons, and under them were two mountain lakes of dazzling blue. I don't know whether it was through boredom or something else, but I felt a wild yearning to make her acquaintance. So I came up on her starboard and rattled off sailorwise:

"Do you mind if I cruise in your company?"

The woman coolly took stock of me, showed her white teeth, and turned away.

It struck me that I could give her an excuse for taking a walk with me.

"There's a mad dog running about here. A great husky brute. Attacks people. You're taking risks...."

She stopped with a look of feigned terror.

"No, really?"

"Why should I lie?"

"In that case will you please walk with me?"

"The pleasure is all mine."

We fell into conversation. She turned out to be a widow. Her husband had been killed at the front. She made a living by sewing.

We walked about till night-time. I was on my best behaviour, so much so that Pauline made another date with me.

As I was approaching my ship, the wind tried to snatch the cap off my head, and the sea growled angrily.

"Oh, I know what I'm doing, you can't frighten me with your threats!" I shouted into the dark.

That night I tossed about in my bunk for a long time. The familiar voice sang in my head like a flute, and my heart longed for a woman's caress like the parched earth for a warm rain.

We would soon be starting on our cruise.

The throb of the *Murena*'s diesel engines floated across the harbour. The dynamo was started. A tremor seized the boat's hull, like a drunkard shivering with a hang-over. The storage batteries were being charged. They would supply power when the submarine was submerged.

The engine room was filled with a racket and a howling noise. Sometimes the sharp hiss of an opened cock tore into the uproar. The oiled diesel engines shone with burnished copper and steel. Their various parts twitched, bounced and jiggled as if they were alive, pistons shuttled back and forth, and little pumps worked up and down. It was hot in here. The motor-men in their greasy work clothes were sweating profusely.

The place was full of fumes, although all the hatches were open. It smelt of heated rubber and machine oil.

The acrid gases got into your lungs, and befuddled your brain like deadly charcoal fumes.

When the storage batteries were sufficiently charged the diesel engines were switched off. It grew quiet.

But work in the boat did not cease. Everyone was busy at his job—washing down the deck and sides, cleaning the various apparatus, putting them in order, and testing the valves. Chief officer Golubev supervised the work. Much too stout for his age, he waddled slowly backwards and forwards, shouting with an air of mock gravity:

"A little more elbow-grease, boys! There'll be dinner soon."

"It's about time, sir," said Zaleikin. "My guts are complaining."

An indulgent smile appeared on the clean-shaven face of the chief officer.

My station in the boat was at the ballast tank and torpedo-tubes forward. I was now busy with the torpedoes.

I looked at the one I had just greased. It had a smooth slippery gloss that cheerfully reflected the bright electric lights. An amusing toy, by Jove! Long and round, with an electric motor inside, and a propeller and rudders at the tail. A self-propelled, self-controlled projectile carrying about two hundred and fifty pounds of powerful explosives. And somewhere there were people, hundreds of living people, going about, eating, drinking, making love, enjoying themselves, and never for a moment suspecting what lay in store for them. Perhaps, within this polished steel lay the malign decree of fate spelling their doom, the dark oblivion of the watery abyss. A flash, and they would be no more than mangled human flesh. And after that? In one country—inconsolable sorrow and tears, with priests singing a requiem for the dead, in another—rejoicings and hosannas, with similar

priests in other vestments offering prayers of thanksgiving to the same god.

What satanic ingenuity invented such an abomination?

Not the church's devil, at any rate. This was none of his doing.

I wish I had never met that fellow Zobov. It was he who had instilled the poison of doubt into my soul.

Here he was himself. His work at his wireless apparatus finished, he stood before me, tall and ungainly. But behind that lumpy forehead of his there was some heavy thinking going on.

The corner of his mouth twisted into a malicious smile.

"Working hard, I see, Vlasov."

"Doing my best."

"That's right. You'll get pie in the sky when you die."

"Oh, go and——"

I bit my tongue just in time: a blond little question-mark of a beard appeared in the doorway of the watertight bulkhead with a flash of gold-rimmed pince-nez. It was our commander, an unprepossessing little man. Ashore he was the most harmless of officers, and no one was afraid of him. But here the entire crew of forty-five men were ruled by his iron hand. He gained gigantic stature in our eyes.

The commander ran a practised eye over the fore compartment and issued an order to the chief officer:

"The supply of machine oil must be in today!"

"Yes, sir!"

They both went out.

The mess pipe sounded.

I meet Pauline every evening. We go for walks in the park or in the wood outside the town. She is always cheerful and winsome; her laughter flows into my soul like a refreshing stream. But the moment I put my arm round her she shrinks with a startled look.

"Don't, oh please don't!"

"Why not, Pauline?"

"You mustn't."

"May I buy you a pair of shoes? Or maybe you'd like a frock?"

Pauline's sunny face clouds. There is an edge to her voice when next she speaks.

"I can buy you a pair of boots myself, if you want."

"Don't be cross, Pauline. I was only joking. Speaking seriously, though, I'd make you quite a different present. It's a pity our boat is lying here in harbour and not somewhere out in the Pacific. I'd get you a pearl from the bottom of the sea such as no countess has, or die in the attempt."

I am rewarded by a smile from her ripe provocative lips.

On the last evening before our cruise I left her with my blood tingling from her kisses.

The whole sea on the chart is marked off in sectors. Our task is to occupy one of those areas and look out for the enemy. The *Murena* is running at full speed.

The swollen clouds hang low. There is a thin drizzle. A dead calm. The damp has obliterated all nature's bright tints. A veil is drawn over sea and sky, and you cannot make out where the one begins and the other ends. All around is an unvaried dreariness, drab and dingy as the thawed snow of autumn. Not a single encounter the whole day. Not even the glimpse of a dolphin leaping out of the water. Everything dull and dead. The wilderness of hushed sea seems to be listening to the steady throb of our diesels, the noise of the churning screws, and the murmur of voices aloft.

Every man of the watch wears a waterproof jacket and a big yellow sou'wester resembling a mushroom.

The chief officer, bending his head, wipes the lenses of his binoculars with a piece of chamois, and says, as if speaking to himself:

"We sailed on a Monday. . . ."

The helmsman tears his eyes away from the compass for a moment and glances at him.

"And it was the thirteenth, sir."

"Yes, so it was!"

"That makes it still worse."

"On the contrary. According to algebra, nothing multiplied by nothing gives plus. This is going to be a lucky cruise."

Night creeps up imperceptibly. Sombre darkness fills up the wide open spaces. The sky becomes black, like newly ploughed land.

Occasionally we sight some islands. Enemy destroyers may be lurking there.

I have a toothache, and it gives me no peace.

Zobov is in his wireless cabin with ear-phones on his head. His face expresses annoyance.

"They don't answer, damn 'em—you'd think they'd all been chloroformed!"

"Who are you swearing at?"

"Those observation-post fellows must have fallen asleep there."

"D'you think we'll be sent west this time?" I ask Zobov.

A pair of keen eyes, sharpened by the bright electric light, regard me narrowly.

"Your duty is to do and die and not to reason why."

I feel like striking the hand that is tapping out the call signs on the telegraph-key.

"There's only one person I owed any duty to—and that was the prostitute who taught me to read and write. I hate you when you play the hypocrite. It's a sham, and you know it."

"Aha!" Zobov cries. "At last! H'm ... yes.... No enemy sighted. All's well."

He scribbles the message on a sheet of paper and runs off to the Captain.

A figure in oilskins comes down the vertical iron ladder into the central station from the conning-tower. I guess by its whistling that it is the chief officer, relieved of his watch. He is always whistling. His lips are like a flute and can produce any tune.

Most of the crew are in the forward compartment, sleeping their heads off while they have the chance. You could hardly call it sleep, though. Rather was it a state of uneasy fitful dozing. Every now and then the sleepers would raise their heads and look round anxiously.

The watch is stationed in the stern compartment of the boat.

In the main electric station two electricians are sitting on stools, facing opposite sides of the boat. In front of them is the switchboard with its knife-switches, voltmeter and amperometer dials.

Further aft the motor-men stand at their motors. Their work clothes are soiled and greasy. Those who are unable to get any sleep loiter here, too, despite the heat.

Suddenly the engine-room telegraph breaks through the noise of the pounding diesels with a din-a-ling! The hand on the big brass dial moves over to "Stop".

The sailors look at one another. Then they get busy, shifting levers.

The engines go dead.

An imperious command comes down the voice pipe: "Ahead both motors!"

"Ahead, sir!" answers the petty officer.

The switches go down with a flash of red-green sparks.

What could this change over from diesel to electric motors mean?

Anxiously the sailors await the next command, more portentous than the first. But nothing follows. The stillness is broken only by the low hum of the electric motors. Quiet though it is, one can feel the two propeller shafts revolving below under the plating. And when all have calmed down, they begin to chaff one of their own mates, making cruel fun of him in order to ease the gnawing pain in their own hearts.

"I wouldn't like to be in your boots, Kirsankin!"

"Why?"

"Here you are, in a manner of speaking, suffering torment like a sinner in hell, while some bounder is getting off with your wife. And that's called life!"

Kirsankin, the orderly, is a young man, who has a beautiful wife. But the war cared nothing for that. In less than a month after his wedding it tore him out of the arms of his beloved. He misses her badly and often writes letters home. He told us about this himself.

He tries to put up a fight:

"He'll only be wasting his time. My wife's not that kind of woman. . . ."

But he is harried from all sides:

"Bosh! Fellows these days are wide awake. They'll get round your wife in no time."

"You shouldn't have touched her for the time being, Kirsankin. Then there might have been some hope for you. As it is you've just pepped up the poor woman."

"If she'd had children, now, she might have kept safe. Children keep women out of mischief. But without them she's done for. Sure as eggs is eggs!"

The orderly snaps back at them and swears himself blue in the face, but it's no use. They attack him worse than ever, as though he were to blame for their hard life.

"That's not half so bad, though, boys. Imagine Kirsankin coming home to find that his wife has presented him with a side-kick—the son of nobody. And she'll

nurse the bastard and make a fuss of it, saying, 'Now isn't he the image of his father! The same eyes, and nose, and little toes!' That's the worst of it."

Roars of laughter follow this speech.

Kirsankin looks around like a hunted animal, dazed by the malicious laughter.

A sudden pause intervenes.

"What were you all laughing at?" asks engineer Ostrogorsky, who has just come up.

"It's Kirsankin, sir—trying to be funny," the petty officer in charge answers with a straight face. "He's been telling us about his wife."

"Something disgusting, I suppose?"

The sailors answer eagerly:

"What can you expect!"

"It's a shame! You feel like stopping your ears up."

The engineer glances at the flustered orderly.

"They're all liars, sir, that's what they are!" Kirsankin declares and goes out.

My tooth still aches. The pain in my head is unbearable; it is like a gimlet boring into my brain.

Time and again I go aloft.

We are moving noiselessly, wrapped in darkness. Our boat does not show a single light. Even smoking is strictly forbidden. Several men including the commander are in the conning-tower, but none of them is visible. The darkness is deep, impenetrable, unnerving. It makes you feel small and puny. There is not a sound all round. Nothing but the murmurous splash of the water under the bows.

"I think there's a light ahead, sir."

"Where?" asks the commander.

"Just over the starboard, sir."

The boatswain's voice sounds muffled, as though smothered by the dampness of the night.

"I don't see anything."

"There it is, look. . . ."

"Careful, damn you! Don't push the binoculars into my face!"

"Sorry, sir."

"Do you see anything?" the commander says, addressing midshipman Kudryavtsev, the torpedo officer.

The latter has a high-pitched voice, but just now he answers in a bass:

"Nonsense, sir! The boatswain has lights in his head."

Straining my eyes hard, I try to penerate the damp cellar-like gloom, and I begin to discern imaginary lights.

Then suddenly, an unexpected apparition slightly to larboard. Against the dark background of the night a door opens somewhere close by, throwing out a streak of light. The figure of a man emerging from a deck-cabin leaps out vividly. Then all is blackness again. Night has swallowed up the apparition. Only the red glow of a cigarette traces fire-fly patterns in the dark. An enormous body rushes past us with a pounding of engines. In a moment, it seems, it will run us down, crush us. My thoughts scatter like waves dashed against the rocks. No, this is no dream, but sinister reality, the chill tangible breath of the grave. I feel the *Murena* lurching. All are silent, stunned.

"How do you like that for a meeting!" the commander at length exclaims.

"Do you think they spotted us?" Kudryavtsev asks in a strangled voice that is almost a whisper.

"Obviously not, otherwise we wouldn't get any further than this spot. . . ."

After a while Kudryavtsev recovers his small bass; it sounds steady and reliable like a tugboat.

My toothache is gone, as if I had been to the dentist's.

At dawn familiar throbbing sounds fill the boat. The *Murena* cruises slowly under a single engine, the other one being used for recharging the batteries. When the supply of electricity is replenished, the boat gets more way upon her.

Blue rifts appear among the clouds. Now and then the sun peeps out, scattering gold pieces over the becalmed sea.

The men often go up on the upper deck to smoke and chat.

Late in the afternoon four wisps of smoke moving in a southwesterly direction are sighted on the horizon. The *Murena* swings off her course and makes towards them. All eyes strain in the direction of the four invisible ships.

"Must be Germans," someone said.

At a command from the conning-tower we had begun to shut the hatches, when another order followed countermanding the first.

The wisps of smoke are retreating. Apparently the unknown ships have altered their course.

In the night the command rings out:

"Rig for diving!"

The men and officers take their stations. Everyone knows that this is no encounter with the enemy, but the boat's resting-place for the night. Therefore no one is alarmed. Nevertheless there is a tension in the air, and every man jumps smartly at the commander's orders.

"Secure the engines! Start the motors!"

The last hatch over the conning-tower is shut down.

I am standing at my station right in the bows, listening with every particle of my body as well as my ears for the crisp jerky commands. I am like the sensitive hand of a pressure-gauge. There comes a command that makes me jump. Swiftly I operate the diving-valve controls of the fore tank.

"The pumps!" I shout.

The electrician switches on the pump-motors.

The water rushes in through the pipes with a metallic clang. The same thing is done aft.

The ballast tanks are flooded, and the *Murena* slowly sinks.

The man at the depth gauge calls the soundings:

"By the mark, ten, twenty feet! A hundred! A hundred and three! Stopped!"

Softly we come to rest on the sea bottom.

There is dead silence in the boat.

The cook, a round tubby man resembling a grampus, is already busy in his galley, cooking supper on the electric range. He has the permanently sheepish look of a man who has lost or forgotten something and can't remember what it is.

"Galley Goof"—the crew called him.

There is a smell of roast meat and onions.

"Supper's ready!" the glad tidings spread.

Every man, with a mess-tin in his hand, makes himself comfortable wherever he can. We polish off the meat, the rice porridge and the cocoa with condensed milk with a hearty appetite.

One man is left to keep watch during the night—the man at the depth gauge. All the rest are free.

I lie in my bunk, chewing tobacco—smoking in the boat is not allowed—and thinking of the woman whose kisses fired my blood.

Suddenly a bell rings.

We all tumble out of our bunks.

For a second or two we stare blankly at one another.

"What's up?"

Then it dawns on us that we are getting ready for surfacing.

Every man is at his station. The necessary controls are operated on the word of command. The blowers

drive the water from the ballast tanks, and the boat begins to rise. The electric motors hum like a beehive. For a time we move along at a depth of twenty-four feet. Our cautious commander does not want to break water at once, and scans the horizon through the periscope. Again we rise with a hiss and whistle. We open the hatches. Something strikes our ears, and for two or three minutes we go deaf, as if our ears had been suddenly corked up. Fresh air rushes into the boat. We breathe in deep gulps.

The morning is still and misty. White creeping phantoms hide the sea from us. We go slowly, listening carefully. The commander keeps wiping his pince-nez. We enter a fog-bank. Visibility is nil. Binoculars are useless. Everything is hazy and mysterious, as though the *Murena* had plunged into milk. The world seems to have turned into floating vapour.

The engines have been stopped. We are alone amidst the deathly silence, waiting for the weather to clear.

At last a breeze wakes up. The fog wavers, and mobs of disembodied phantom shapes come into motion. Gaps form here and there, like rocky gorges, with fantastic silvery rivers flowing through them. Shortly the whole expanse is clear and limpid, answering the fresh sparkle of the morning sun. The sea and sky gaze at each other like two lovers after a long separation.

We are under way once more. Here, in these waters, lies our patrol area. We cruise about for a long time in the blue wilderness.

Suddenly the signaller cries out:

"Something to larboard, sir, across the bows!"

Binoculars fly up.

The naked eye can only see a dark speck. It rolls swiftly towards the *Murena* like a little ball. The sun dazzles our eyes. We strain them till they begin to water. It is a fly rushing towards us. No, it isn't, it's a big

beetle skimming across the blue mirror, all golden in the reflected sunbeams.

"A submarine!" the chief officer declares.

"Stations for diving!" comes the order.

We all scuttle inboard with the speed of frightened cats.

The *Murena*, with flooded tanks, dives down with the help of her diving rudders, which resemble the fins of a fish. She moves forward at periscope depth.

I am stationed at my torpedo tubes.

"One foot up!" comes the command.

"One foot up, sir!" the answer comes like an echo from inside the boat.

"Stand by for launching torpedoes forward!"

We open the tube doors. The water can be heard splashing in the bows.

The suspense is nerve-racking. Ship discipline holds me in complete subjection. I have no soul or will of my own. I am all ears and tensed nerves.

Suddenly all the men, myself included, who happen to be in the fore part, swiftly duck their heads as if to avoid a flying stone. We hold our breath until our lungs feel like bursting.

From outboard comes a familiar clucking sound, like a hurried death-rattle. It is an enemy torpedo drilling the green mass of water. It streaks past right overhead so closely that it seems to graze one's skull.

It seems as if a long ice-cold needle has been plunged into your spine, making your flesh shrink in a crawling chill. I cannot see my own face, but those around me are all drained of life and have the look of a bull that has been knocked on the head with a hammer. At that moment of awful suspense the seconds seem agonizing hours. At last the human figures straighten up. Someone sighs with relief.

"Missed us. . . ."

Young seaman Mitroshkin still clutches his head, which is drawn into his shoulders, as though he would protect it against the blow. He cries in a high-pitched voice:

"That was a near squeak! Hee, hee.... A regular miracle, boys. Hee, hee, hee...."

His body twitches as he stares round. A nervous titter falls from his blue trembling lips. Then he pulls himself together and begins to cross himself.

Zaleikin attempts a joke.

"Our boat is like a guitar, damn it—it echoes every blessed sound...."

Another command. We continue to submerge.

What is that?

An explosion aft, an explosion forward. A minute afterwards, a clang of iron to starboard, right next to us. The *Murena* shies like a frightened beast.

The depth-gauge shows sixty-two feet. The boat's keel touches bottom with a grating sound like the grinding of teeth. The whole frame shudders as though from sheer terror.

Scraps of thoughts whirl in my brain like bits of paper in a flurry of wind. Imagination pictures us being pursued by destroyers. Perhaps they have minesweepers too? They will find us by means of nets and depth bombs. If that's the case, we are doomed. What can we do? Nothing. We are helpless.

Two more explosions on each side.

A whisper runs through the boat:

"Hydroplanes! Hydroplanes are after us!"

The information comes from the conning-tower, from the commander himself, the only man aboard who knows what is going on.

From the air, without a doubt, we are visible to the enemy. He tracks his prey like a sea-gull a fish. To escape the enemy we must take refuge in deeper water. But

underfoot comes the sound of scrunching iron again. Every unfamiliar sound grates upon your nerves.

We are getting farther and farther away from those accursed shoals. The thing is to slip through the rocks without getting wedged in them!

A tremendous thump astern, as if someone has hit the hull with a sledge-hammer. The men cower, glancing silently at each other with glassy-cold eyes.

My throat is painfully dry.

At last we have a hundred and thirty feet of water above us, and touch bottom.

"Let me have some hot tea!" the commander cries sharply from the wardroom.

In the crew's space seaman Zaleikin tunes up his mandolin.

We are homeward bound.

Night. I cannot fall asleep. Neither can the other sailors. Zobov talks astronomy to them. Zaleikin goes off on his favourite subject.

"The girls in our Penza Gubernia are simply ripping, I tell you!"

"Good-lookers?"

"You bet! We've got rich soil down there. They're peaches to look at, and if you just touch them you get an electric shock."

"They're a bit heavy around the lampposts, though, I heard say."

"I suppose you like spindle-shanks, like the city girls'. No, ours stand squarely on the ground. By the time you drag one of 'em round the corner you're all in a lather. Got to earn your pleasure in the sweat of your brow, so to speak. That's what the good book says, doesn't it?"

Another complains about not having had any letters from home for a long time.

In the wardroom the officers are playing chess.

I go aloft. There is no one up on deck but the conning-tower watch—chief officer Golubev and helmsman Mazurin. I go up and sit down on the edge of the turret.

"Why aren't you sleeping, Vlasov?" the chief officer asks.

"Come up for a breath of fresh air, sir."

"Own up—your lady-love doesn't give you any sleep."

"You can't blame me. A mouse lives on straw and still thinks of love, whilst I eat pure bread and drink cocoa."

It is too lovely a night to spoil it by talking.

The throbbing engines stitch the sheet of water like a sewing-machine. Black, with no lights burning, the *Murena* races across the smooth sea like a startled fish. A white fringe of foam breaks alongside.

I breathe deep of the salty air and cannot get Pauline out of my mind. My yearning for her is almost a pang. To divert my thoughts I gaze at the sky. It is sprinkled with grains of golden lentils. On the starboard bow hangs a new-born moon. Where were the mountains on it that Zobov had spoken about? It does not look like a moon just now, but like a silver nail which the angels have snipped off God's big toe and left hanging poised in dark-blue space. Once more my thoughts, like birds of passage, fly shorewards.

Dawn found me still sitting there as we entered the harbour.

I went straight to Pauline's lodgings. She was at home. Standing in the middle of the long narrow room, with its single window, she was trying on a dress on a mannequin.

"Good morning, Pauline."

"Ah, you're back."

She half-heartedly gave me her cold hand and resumed her work.

"What's the matter, dear? Aren't you feeling well?"

"No, I'm not."

"What is it?"

"Heartache."

"What complaint is that?"

Pauline looked at me suspiciously. Her voice had an edge.

"Tell me better how your precious wife is getting on"

I was puzzled.

"What wife?"

"The wives men usually have."

"Who's been telling you lies?"

"News flies quickly."

Pauline's voice was as brittle as autumn wormwood

One thing was clear to me—it was all over between us. My love was killed. Somebody had dug its grave. I wonder who? I could find no reply in my muddled brain.

The alarm-clock ticked drearily on the chest of drawers. The floor was littered with bits of cloth. On the table —a sewing-machine, a flat-iron, and pieces of material. But what was this? Against the wall facing me stood a sailor; he was oddly familiar: a big dishevelled man, standing stiffly as if at attention; a hairless face, like an actor's, with working jaws and yellow staring eyes; in one hand he clutched a cap—I tried in vain to make out the gold lettering on it.

A mist swam before my eyes.

My gaze shifted to Pauline. Fear and alarm were written upon her face. I looked back again at the opposite wall. Only now did I see a large cheval-glass there with my reflection in it.

"Good-bye, Pauline. Farewell!"

Her voice, tremulous, heart-melting, arrested me in the doorway:

"Wait a minute, Semyon! Come back."

I hesitated.

Her fair pretty head dropped on my chest. Despair, anguish, confession, the whole sad story of a lonely soul was poured out in a voice choky with sobs. I never could bear to see a woman's tears—there is always something childlike and helpless about them. I comforted her, I kissed her sweet face, salty as the sea itself.

The storm was over. My soul was serene, like a shining sky. Soft eyes, like twin beacons with blue lights, gazed into mine. The call of the earth, the rapture of the sun was in them.

It had been pouring all day. That was why the sailors had stayed in the depot ship. The hum of voices and sounds of music could be heard on the *Amur*.

I soaked myself with war news and passed the paper over to Zobov.

"Would you like to look at it?"

"What for?"

"The war reports are well done."

"No, thanks. I'll read about that human folly afterwards when clever and honest people have written serious books about it."

Zobov was sitting on his bunk, busy mending his old trousers.

That queer-looking man intrigues me more and more. I know practically the whole crew, and all there is to know about them—where every man comes from, whether he is married or single. But who is Zobov? He has broad hands and thick scarred fingers with broken crooked nails—work-hardened hands. Just enough to leave one guessing. His past is unknown. He is a malcontent, bitterly criticizing everything. He paints life to me in its ugliest colours. There is very little good in the world, and a great deal of evil. The beauty of nature, which I

delight in, is to him so much scenery. And men who have scaled the supreme heights of learning are no better than the preying beasts that tear each other's throats.

"Does that include yourself?" I ask him.

"It does!" he says grimly. "Because I, too, am living on this wicked earth. I have nowhere to go."

Facing us, some sailors were dancing the Cracovienne to the accompaniment of an accordion. Zobov looked at them, a frown puckering his immense forehead. Then he lowered his head, sunk in thought.

"There's so much foolishness in this world," he resumed after a pause.

"Meaning?"

"Just look at Mazurin over there."

Mazurin is our helmsman. He stood near by, dressed in his new uniform, and did not know where to pin his St. George's Cross.

"I don't see anything foolish there."

"You will in a minute."

Zobov called Mazurin up and asked him:

"You have another cross besides the St. George's, haven't you?"

Mazurin stared at him blankly.

"I mean the one you got when you were baptized."

"I'm wearing it. What about it?"

"There," Zobov said exultantly. "So you're wearing two crosses on one and the same chest—one picturing Christ on the cross, and the other St. George. Now tell me this, what exactly do you mean by wearing those two crosses?"

"You're just cranky, that's all I can tell you!" Mazurin threw out and went away.

"That's what I call smart!" one of the sailors said, looking admiringly at Zobov. "It works out then that a fellow gets one cross so's he shouldn't shed human

blood, and another one for having shed it. Could you beat that!"

"What do you have to say to that?" Zobov turned to me.

I had nothing to say, and so I kept silent.

Zobov's ideas stick in my mind like burrs to a sheepskin and give me no peace.

A storm of feelings, tumultuous as the waters of the Bay of Biscay, rages in my breast. I begin a furious attack, a vehement onslaught upon Pauline. But she puts up a stubborn resistance.

"What about the consequences?"

When she puts that question her face grows tragically peaked.

"The future will take care of itself."

"But if it happens?"

The colour floods her face.

"It'll mean another human being to bring us joy, that's all."

"You sing a sweet tune, Semyon, but—— I prefer the legal way, like all good people do."

"What's good people got to do with it? Scoundrels go to the altar too."

She was about to say something, but I interrupted her, bitterly, mockingly:

"I tell you what, Pauline. I'll bring a couple of divers' helmets and shine them up as good as your marriage wreaths. We'll stick them on our heads and take a boat ride round the pier. We can go round thirty-three times, not just three. The sea-breeze will pipe up the marriage service: 'Semyon and Pauline! Leave your parents and make fast to each other by stout ropes of love for better or for worse. And rejoice, go off with a bang and shake the angels out of heaven.' And my pal Zobov, the

wireless operator, can give us a little lecture concerning the matrimonial life. I must introduce him to you. A remarkable man. He'll tell you all about life's different comedies. Ha, ha.... There was a time when people did without priests—they loved, lived, and died. And then came the actors...."

Pauline stared at me in sheer terror, as if I were a madman. Then her eyelids swelled, and sorrow oozed from her corn-flower blue eyes like the gathering moisture of fading autumn.

I was disarmed, crushed, completely undone.

What is love?

Not even Zobov can answer that question.

•

It was a memorable day.

Exactly two years ago our *Murena* left the womb of the shipyards and slid into the water. That day is considered her birthday, and we celebrate it.

The day before the event we touched her up, washed down the deck, tidied up, and polished the brass fittings and steel engine parts. The curly-haired boatswain kept shouting:

"Make a good job of it, boys! Give her a shine up so's you can do your hair without using a mirror, like in St. Isaac's Cathedral."

And today, since seven in the morning, the whole boat was dressed with flags. The multicoloured sheets fluttered in the blue void, and the sunshine lent them a more intense hue.

Galley Goof had long been busy at his electric range. He had the portentous air of a witch-doctor treating a sick man for some malignant disease.

"Livelier there with that mincer!" he growled at seaman Rubtsov. "You've been put here to help me, not to do the sojer act."

Rubtsov grinned, showing teeth like a picket-fence.

"Christ, you give me the pip, you moon-faced swab!"

By noon all the preparations were completed. Vases with big bunches of flowers stood on improvised tables. The *Murena*'s interior was brilliant with electric lights. The gears and instruments were decorated with foliage and flowers.

The boatswain was in the central station. He darted a practised eye fore, then aft, and his face cracked into a broad smile.

"Now we're all-a-taunto! That's the way to do things."

Besides our own officers we had guests—the commodore, his assistant, and the commanders of the other submarine boats. The wardroom was bright with white regulation jackets and gold braid. In the fore part—rows of duck jumpers with blue collars.

I was sitting at the bottom of the table, and so could see all that was going on in the wardroom.

The band aloft struck up *God Save the Tsar.*

We all stood up. But that was merely for form's sake. The national anthem was of small interest. All eyes were fixed hungrily on the tables, appetizingly set with snacks and liquor. We had diluted spirits, the officers something brown in gleaming wineglasses.

When the band finished playing, Commodore Berg announced, "Attention please!"

The only sound was the humming of the electric fans.

Berg had stern bulging eyes.

"Gentlemen! Today the *Murena,* according to naval tradition, is celebrating her anniversary. She has been performing her duties faithfully now for two years and already has appreciable services to her credit. I trust that, under the command of such a gallant officer as Vladimir Belsky and his assistants in the person of the officers and crew, she will continue to acquit herself admirably and strike terror into the heart of the enemy."

The cold platitudes flew past our ears like so many fish-scales, but we all cheered and drank.

Our commander made a speech, too, thanking the officers and the crew, and wound up by proposing the health of the Commodore.

Vociferous cheers mingled confusedly with the gay lilt of the band.

Lieutenant Rakitnikov, the commander of the *Wolverine*, interests me greatly.

His thickset figure is suggestive of great physical strength. He has stark rugged features. The waxed ends of his moustache stick out from under his big nose like two sharp nails.

Rakitnikov is well known to all the men of the submarine fleet. He had previously served aboard a British submarine, a single Russian among a British crew. In an encounter with an enemy destroyer the boat was struck aft by a shell. The destroyer was torpedoed and sunk, but the submarine crash-dived and touched bottom at a very great depth.

The after tank of the British submarine was so badly damaged that nothing could be done to free it of ballast. When the middle and fore tanks were blown all the boat could do was to stand on end. Between her and the surface there was still a thick layer of water. The situation was tragic. Death stared the whole crew in the face. Human ingenuity could devise no other means of escape than that offered by the fore torpedo-tube. Only sheer desperation could drive men to take such a terrible risk. A man crawls into the long torpedo-tube; the breech-door is shut and the muzzle-door opened, and the man is shot out by compressed air. The whole procedure was like a ghastly nightmare, but the man had no alternative. Luckily two Russian minesweepers came upon the scene. Among the few survivors they picked up was Rakitnikov.

He was offered leave, but refused it. He was imme-

diately given command of the *Wolverine*. After several cruises he had eclipsed the fame of all the other submariners. Such things as minefields and net barrages did not exist for him. He made his appearance in the enemy's waters, raising pandemonium among them. Many a time had he escaped pursuit by sub-chasers.

What interests me is the reason why that man displays such daredevil recklessness. What makes him dance on the brink? He has been awarded a gold sword for bravery, but he does not seem to care much about it. He sits with bent head, pouring vodka into himself. The bald patch on the top of his head shines like a puddle amongst the grass. I wonder what is going on under it. There is a strained expression in his eyes, and a heavy crease across his wide forehead. I have a feeling that something is preying on his mind.

Commodore Berg glanced at him and got up. In place of his former air of austerity he had arranged an official smile on his face.

"We have among us, gentlemen, a most gallant commander, worthy of emulation. Being a man of modest habits, he tries to keep in the background. I do not have to tell you whom I mean——"

"Rakitnikov!" voices were raised.

"Here's to the commander of the *Wolverine*!"

Rakitnikov stood up and looked round the company with bleary eyes, inscrutable as periscopes.

"Gentlemen! Eight years of sailing in a submarine have made me a fatalist. You all know my former commander. The scrapes that man had been in before I met him! You also know how he and I escaped from the sunken boat through the torpedo-tube. He went home after that, and there, on dry land, he caught a cold and died. Everything depends on fate, you see. Personally I am convinced, somehow, that nothing will happen either to me or to the *Wolverine*. That's why I don't

consider myself in any way pluckier than the next man. Better let us drink to our first and bravest submariner—the good old prophet Jonah. . . ."

"Bravo, Rakitnikov! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The health of the other officers, too, was toasted.

A little later two men went away—the Commodore and his assistant. But with their departure the boat seemed to become roomier.

What does the morrow hold in store for us? Oh, who cares! Why worry about it! The chief officer gave us some more liquor—several bottles of brandy. Our high-strung nerves were quickly stimulated. Soon we raised hell's delight, with the music going like mad. Gusts of laughter swept the boat fore and aft. Snatches of talk, disjointed shouts broke through the din and uproar.

"Let's go ashore, boys, have a roaring spree!"

"Leadsman in the chains—take the soundings. . . ."

"Ho, ho! We won't half go it!"

"Can any of you boys come across with the needful? My pocket's like a Turkish drum—nothing but air in it," said Zaleikin.

Accidentally he pushed the boatswain, who dropped a piece of meat-pie he was eating.

"Mooching around like you was in a strange country," growled the boatswain.

Zaleikin patted his curly head.

"Keep your hair on, sonny—you've got the cramps in it as it is. I can't help myself, I'm just mad to make whoopee."

"What's a submariner's discipline?" one sailor asked.

"It's a bottle of vodka, a couple of cucumbers for a snack, and a good comrade."

"You bet! Snap into it, blast your salty hide!"

The wardroom had its own talk. One of the officers proposed:

"Let's drink to those who are absent—the fair sex. . . ."

Rakitnikov shook his head.

"To hell with the women!" he said. "What is a woman? Sweet poison that kills a man's soul. . . ."

"I don't agree, Victor! Without women life would be dull and vapid."

"Nonsense! Dope!"

The junketing went on for a long time. The men danced, yelled songs, and tossed the officers. Two sailors had a fight. Both were packed off to the "hard luck," as we called the lock-up.

Towards the evening the company broke up. Of the officers only the chief officer and Lieutenant Rakitnikov remained on the boat. The latter was pretty drunk by this time, but still kept demanding more liquor.

"Give me something with more kick in it, you know, something to deaden the heartache."

"All right, only don't go to the base. The admiral's there, and you're likely to get into trouble. Lie down on my bunk."

"I'm not afraid of anybody—devil or admiral! What's an admiral, anyway? Just a half-witted commodore, that's all."

Rakitnikov's legs behaved independently, and so I helped the chief officer to get him into his bunk. He complained dejectedly:

"I'm fed up with this war. The same thing every day. Everywhere treachery, lies, and meanness. Life's been made such a bloody mess of. D'you know what I want, friend?"

"What?"

"The minimum—kingdom come."

"And the maximum?"

Rakitnikov looked at him fuzzily and twisted his lips into a smile.

"As a maximum I wouldn't mind marrying, only I'm married already. . . ."

I and that drunken lieutenant, speaking his mind so frankly, were different men from different classes of society. He had been educated in the Cadets' Corps, whilst I, since a child, had been flung into the vortex of the waterside slums like an unwanted puppy. But just then I sincerely pitied him. The war had hit everyone hard, and even the officers were beginning to groan.

I have made an important discovery.

One evening I was walking along the sea-shore with Pauline. Clouds of different colours hung in the west and over the horizon. They looked like casual dabs made by a brush, as though some artist had been trying out his paints on a blue-pink canvas. The wantoning wind had long since flown westward in chase of the setting sun, but the sea still sighed, and the rippling waves sang their mysterious song. The iron-throated shrieks of the ships rent the evening stillness with a sound of ripping cloth.

We met a former shipmate of mine off the *Trigla*—petty officer Mukhoboyev.

"Hullo, Semyon. How do you do? Haven't seen you for ages."

"Thanks, pretty bobbish."

He shook my hand warmly, then made a leg scrape to Pauline.

"I salute you, fairest lady!"

Pauline's face slightly paled, and her ears went crimson.

I sensed her agitation, and began to suspect that she was acquainted with him, had known him before this meeting. Perhaps it was he who had lied to her about my being married.

"You're a lucky man, Vlasov."

"In what sense?"

"Walking arm in arm with such a queen—why, it's enough to make a man's heart burst like a water tank. For her kiss alone I could break the devil's own horns for him."

Pauline laughed.

When he had gone, I asked her:

"Well, what do you think of him?"

"I don't think anything."

She veiled her blue eyes behind her eyelashes.

I probed further:

"He doesn't exactly shine intellectually, and he's no oil-painting either. True, he's a fine body of a man—fit to be an admiral even—but then look at his dial, a regular bouncer in a brothel. Broad mouth like a sheat-fish. And the nose—a whopper as big as a poop lantern. . . ."

Pauline interrupted me in a nettled voice:

"It's not a bit interesting. Every person has some failing or other."

For the first time in her presence I clenched my teeth.

On the following days we met Mukhoboyev again, and always as if by accident. He talks all kinds of nonsense to Pauline and praises her to the skies, like a horse-dealer going over the points of his horse. He tries to get chummy with me, but I feel that he is trying to get to windward of me, while actually he is after Pauline. And she flutters her eyes at him ever more often.

One day I said to her:

"Pauline! Don't play about with dynamite! If you touch me off you'll be sorry!"

She clung to me like the sea to the shore.

"Semyon! My darling submariner! Can't you see how I'm pining away for you? I don't sleep all day and I eat nothing all night."

Her laughter swept over me like a dash of glittering spray.

Then she lulled my suspicions with caresses.

I was going to the post-office with the official mail. The stone walls of the houses were hot with the noonday heat. The air here seemed stuffy and drugged after the sea.

"Vlasov!" a familiar voice hailed me.

I looked round. It was Zobov.

"Heard anything about our cruise?" he asked.

"No," I answered. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Visiting the infantry. Went to see a pal. He's going off to the front soon."

"What's the feeling among the soldiers?"

"They're just spoiling for a fight. Regular lions."

Zobov was shamming again, the sly dog. He seldom drank and kept clear of women, yet he was always going somewhere. I wonder where? His mysterious errands were a secret to everybody.

He came down the street with me. We met cripples in khaki—lame men, armless men, consumptives, blind men, men on crutches, men crawling on all fours, men with lacerated flesh and broken bones—all those gnawed remnants of humanity who had been through the iron jaws of war. Their numbers grew month by month. There were not enough hospitals for them, and many private houses had been turned into military hospitals. What would it be like in a year's time if the war still continued? Side by side with this you had companies of raw recruits, callow youths and bearded men, marching down the streets singing rollicking songs.

Zobov nodded towards them and said, without any attempt at concealment:

"They're going there too."

"Where?"

"Into the mincing-machine. Can you imagine that monstrous meat grinder a thousand miles long? It has already spewed out millions of cripples, and has turned

millions more into carrion. And still it hasn't had enough. It is still grinding away like mad. . . ."

Zobov always rouses in me a desire to argue with him, and I invent a pretext to bring him out.

"You've always had a down on everyone and everything, and now it's the war."

Zobov looked round cautiously, then said in a low voice:

"I know what I'm about. The thing is—in the name of what are we shedding all this blood? We've been told that the Germans attacked us, and the Germans in turn have been told that the Russians attacked them. The result was troops drawn up on the frontiers. Have you ever seen dogs being set on to fight? One is thrown at the other or their noses are poked together. The dogs start fighting tooth and nail, tearing lumps out of each other. That's what is happening to people. And it doesn't enter anyone's mind. . . ."

As we turned the corner of the street, a snuffling voice at our feet whined:

"Sailor boys, please help a poor cripple."

It was a beggar. He was sitting on the ground, deformed and hideous, like some grisly spectre of the night, swaying and bowing to us. Short naked stumps stuck out instead of legs. His head and body were covered with sores and scabs, and his inflamed eyes oozed pus.

"Thank you, brothers, God bless you," his snuffling gratitude for the alms we dropped him trailed drearily after us.

We walked along for a while in silence.

"Well, what do you say about that bit of human wreckage?" Zobov asked me.

"It's loathsome."

"I daresay he loathes himself. Yet he lives. If you asked him whether he wants to go to the front, he'd refuse. He clings to life. And they write that we're just spoiling for

a fight. But the time is not far off when we'll really fight like lions—fight for the people's freedom."

Zobov lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

I left him and went to the post-office.

The *Murena* was in full sea trim, her storage batteries charged, her machinery tested, and her apparatuses in good repair. We were expecting sailing orders. Meanwhile we continued to live in the depot ship.

After dinner chief officer Golubev came down to the mess deck. Something ominous in his face put the men on their guard at once.

"Look here, bos'un," he said, "the whole crew has to be aboard the *Murena* by midnight."

"Very good, sir!"

"This cruise is going to be real business."

"Yes, sir!"

Golubev went away.

Talk started among the crew.

"We're going to have hell afloat again."

"Rotten luck."

"I wonder where we're going this time?"

"As if anybody will tell us!"

"Hell, what a crazy life!"

Zobov missed no opportunity to drop prickly ideas into men's brains like so many burrs.

The crew cut loose, and curses flew about like dirt from under a horse's hoofs.

Wild with excitement, I rushed off to the surgeon's assistant—a pal of mine—for some spirits.

Pauline was alone in her room.

I set the bottle on the table and laid out the snacks.

"Whose birthday is it?" Pauline laughed.

My head drooped over the table, heavy with bitter thoughts.

"Call it a farewell party—maybe a funeral feast."

"A farewell party? Whose funeral?"

"We've got sailing orders. This time we're going on a very dangerous cruise. Who knows, maybe we shall never meet again in this world...."

Alarm flashed in Pauline's eyes.

"You mustn't say that. You'll come back safe and sound. And I'll come down to the sea-shore to wait for your home-coming."

Her anxiety and sympathy make me sadder still.

I filled the glasses with spirits diluted with cherry syrup.

"Let's have a drink, dear."

"Well, just a drop—for your sake."

The stuff merely burned my chest without deadening the gnawing pain in my heart. I felt an overpowering desire to pour out my soul. Oddly enough, I found that I as well as Pauline was listening to my own voice, which sounded hollow and muffled.

"Yes, dear, that's what war is. A serious business. It's no picnic. They don't treat you here to pies and fruit tarts, but to shells with dynamite and all kinds of other nasty stuff. But that's nothing to what we submariners have to stand...."

I talked about the hard life we had, and my words were sincere enough. But at the same time I felt a kind of duality, as if it were someone else in me who had set himself a definite object.

Although the day was ebbing and we were sitting in semi-darkness, I could see Pauline's stricken face and the two tear-drops glistening in the corners of her beautiful eyes.

She flung her arms round my neck.

"Enough of that, dearest! I don't want to hear any more. My God, what sufferings! Semyon, darling.... Don't take on like that, don't break your heart. Better have a drink. I'll drink with you, too, if you like. Do you want me to?"

"Yes, darling, let's drink."

Her hands shook, and the neck of the bottle rattled on the edge of the glass. The spilt liquor dripped onto my knees.

I was very sorry for Pauline, but somehow I wanted to see her cry. I didn't know why myself. My heart was crushed in a hot grip and there was an agony of despair in my voice.

"Pauline! I will be thinking of you out there at sea, deep down at the bottom."

She covered my face with tears and kisses.

"Oh, don't speak like that. Please, don't. It's dreadful. It reminds me of my husband. When I heard he'd been killed I nearly did away with myself. You'll come back. I'll be yours.... Semyon, dearest! I am yours now. Do you hear me, darling! Yours unwedded.... My tormentor! My sweet, my crazy submariner!"

My muscles thrilled to the touch of her quivering clinging body. A hot flame shot through all my veins.

Wedding candles lit up in the evening sky.

I have crossed the line....

The *Murena* rushed through the darkness of the night with thudding engines.

At daybreak the weather freshened. A blustery northwester, skittish as a young foal, sprang up. The clouds in the East looked red-hot, like iron in a forge. The sea blossomed with peonies. Then the sun peeped out, welcoming the hearty morn. Radiant smiles dimpled the sea. But the next minute the sparkling world faded. The sea

and sky took on a lowering aspect. The elements were preparing for some solemn rite. In the afternoon the wild revelries started.

I stood on the upper deck, gripping the iron ladder of the conning-tower like a vice. The sea roared with millions of open mouths. Dark toothless jaws seized our boat, then, choking with steel, spat her out again. Ah, you don't like it! The heaving boiling hills dash themselves upon the hull, but no one fears them! Our *Murena* is sea-kindly and as stable as a cork tumbler. She rears her sharp nose as though she were about to leap into the tumultuous air. The next moment she plunges into the mass of seething foam. And the vagabond-wind, my eternal friend, pipes into my ear: "Congratulations on your marriage!" The sea drenches me and laughs: "Take a bath! Ha, ha!" I am wet to the skin, but have no desire to go below. My heart is all on fire. I gaze at the loafing swollen clouds. Golden fissures flash on and off among them. Rolling thunder crashes across the sky.

The commander is standing in the turret with binoculars. His lips are firmly pressed together. The point of his little beard is blunted. His grey eyes are fastened upon the darkling horizon.

"What are you doing up here?" he shouts to me.

"Admiring the fury of the elements, sir!"

The commander waves a deprecating hand and smiles.

A big green-eyed sea rolls up growling: "What shall I tell Pauline?"—and races aft. The wind has gone on the rampage: it drives the air back into my lungs, turns my eyes out, whips my mouth with salty kisses. My head is like the foaming expanse of sea, whirling with wild, intoxicating thoughts. What if I throw my heart into the sea? The turbulent waves would snatch it up, spin it round, and sweep it, singing, towards my native shores, and it would glow and shine like Sirius in the sky.

Roar louder, wild storm! This is my gala day!

I am in the centre of a mad orgy. My wedding is being celebrated. Everything around me is in motion. The waters part and meet, make faces at the sky and show it foaming tongues. Overhead, in the inaccessible heights, drunken mobs are holding a roaring spree, smashing iron and rolling hundred-ton barrels down stony hills. Fiery whips are slashing at the reeking clouds. Somewhere fireworks are let off. All the space between sea and sky is a medley of sounds—one can hear a solemn liturgy and laughter, the clang of oven doors and the notes of a clarinet, the rumble of drain-pipes and the roar of a lion herd. The waves shake white flags before my dazed eyes. Five hundred thudding horse-power pant inboard.

I mentally turn that herd of horses out upon the surface of the sea. They careen off madly into the misty distance. The *Murena* races after them, dancing, curveting, rushing headlong from wave to wave, floundering in the troughs like a sledge in the snow-drifts. Hoy, hold tight! Diamond dust whirls in the air. No king ever had such a hilarious wedding.

The ancient little God broke down and cried, and his tears fell big and heavy.

I went down among the pounding diesel engines and the fumes of overheating oil.

I passed through the wardroom. The navigating officer sat at his little table over the sea charts. In front of him lay various instruments—a barometer, speed indicator, mileage recorder, depth-gauge and a Sperry compass. Chief officer Golubev lay on his bunk in his tiny cabin, his feet cocked up against the bulkhead. He was whistling a tune, like a lark. Most of the crew were in the fore part of the boat. It was stuffy there. Some of them were sprawling in their bunks, seasick. Galley Goof was so sick that he lay without stirring, his face green and eyes

glassy. The sailors covered him with a white sheet and were chanting the funeral service over him amid shouts of laughter.

Some of the crew grumbled:

"Our commander is in a damned big hurry to get somewhere."

"Yes, it's about time we went under for the night."

One sailor asked:

"What causes a gale, anyway?"

Another offered the explanation:

"It's the devil-in-chief blowing his nose."

Zobov, looking frowzy and washed-out, raised his head.

"What's the difference who it is—the devil or God? You can't stop them just the same."

Towards the evening we altered our course. Our boat started rolling. I had a hard time on my bunk. We were rocked like babies in a cradle, the furious gale our nurse. She kicked the boat's iron sides, snarling, "Go to sleep, you salt-water devils." Or else she'd start screaming a ribald song, like a drunken woman. She steadily worked herself up into a fury because she couldn't lull us to sleep. Our cradle swung jerkily, violently, shaking all our guts. We didn't have a moment's peace.

The *Murena* came to the end of her tether. The storm was too much for her.

The command was given to submerge.

Our boat lay at a depth of a hundred and fifty feet. She was now as steady as a church. The storm sounded far-off and muffled. Here all was quiet, except for the buzzing of the ventilators.

Everyone was his old cheerful self, as if he had never been seasick. Galley Goof was busy with his cooking.

Someone started a gramophone. A woman sang a love-song in a lilting voice. Things became more cheerful in the boat.

My thoughts were drawn back to Pauline. Where is she now, what is she doing? Perhaps she is gazing at the stormy sea, and a pang goes through her warm heart at the thought of me. But it may be otherwise. Mukhoboyev is obstinate and insolent.... I violently break the thread of my thoughts and start talking to Zobov.

"What were you doing before you were called up?" I asked him.

He was lying on his back, staring up at the electric lamp with a thoughtful air.

"Why?"

"Oh, I was just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat."

"Trying to be clever again."

He turned his face towards me and drawled:

"I've been through fire and water and hell upon earth —and have come through safe and sound. What tomorrow will bring, I don't know. Does that satisfy you?"

"Quite. Thanks."

Then I changed my ground.

"What do you think of doing after the war?"

"I think nothing. All we chaps need is a strong neck— we'll always find a yoke for it."

Zaleikin was busy at the gramophone. It was his favourite pastime. His shipmates kept nagging him:

"Let's have a yarn, old chap."

"Oh, go to heli," he waved them off.

"Hang it all, what does it cost you to give us a bit of chin-music?"

"Oh, go and f—fry your face! Better listen to the gramophone. I'm putting on *The Old Lime-Tree*. Gee, what a song! When I'll be dying I'll ask someone to sing it to me, I will. And if I have strength enough, I'll sing it myself. I'll go out with a song."

Zaleikin stood with upraised eyebrow, spellbound by the singer's tenor.

Over the door of the officer's compartment hung an image of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of mariners. He looked down at his protégés with a stern eye, as if displeased at the fact that they had forgotten him; instead of prayers, he was obliged to listen to the most blood-curdling language it is possible to imagine. Only one man out of the whole crew treated him with Christian piety—that was the young seaman Mitroshkin. This evening, too, before crawling under the blanket after supper, he turned towards the icon and crossed himself.

"Letting your light shine?" Zobov said with a malicious smile.

"Yes, because I'm not a godless sinner, like you!" Mitroshkin snapped back.

"I never heard of any seaman who'd been made a saint yet. This sign-of-the-cross business won't help you, not if you stand on your head to do it."

"Leave me alone, you wireless blister!"

But Zobov went on coolly:

"You needn't get wild about it. I'm talking sense. Now take that Bible ass, for instance. It carried Christ, but a fat lot of good that did it! It didn't get into paradise all the same."

The other sailors chimed in:

"Wireless Willie has given the straight of it. Look at the pull that ass had, yet a miserable ass it remained."

The crew laughed, while Mitroshkin lay on his bunk swearing.

We surfaced early in the morning. The horizon was clear. We continued on our way.

Nothing but a swell remained of yesterday's gale. The *Murena* rocked rhythmically. Above us, freshly blue, sparkled the waterless ocean. Beneath us stretched a rolling boundless steppe with swaying polished hillocks,

gleaming as though bestrewn with bits of broken mirror.

The throbbing engines drove the boat towards the mysterious horizon.

What lay in store for us there, beyond that blue line?

At dinner, we had just started on the last course, our favourite stewed fruit, when the emergency bell sounded. Its harsh clang always has a nerve-jangling effect. We dropped our meal and rushed to our diving stations.

This time it looked like serious business.

"Flood the middle tank!" ordered the commander.

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Ahead both motors! Nine hundred amperes on the shaft!"

We were cruising at periscope depth. After general quarters has been sounded no talk is allowed. There is dead silence. The electric motors can be heard humming their shrill plaintive song. What is happening up there? The commander alone knows that; he alone is in touch with the outside world by means of the periscope. All the rest of us, forty odd men, are no longer human beings. We are living adjuncts to the gears and instruments of which there are so many inboard.

Within a quarter of an hour we break water.

"Man the guns!"

We open the hatches. Together with the others I scrambled out on the upper deck. Before us was a German steamer. At our signal she hove to, rocking heavily on the lazy swell. We came nearer. Cattle could be seen on the deck. Chief officer Golubev shouted something in German through a megaphone. There was a commotion on the steamer. In a few minutes her whole crew took to the boats and rowed away from the ship, while the boat with the Captain and his mate pulled for our submarine.

The gunners shelled the steamer, but she sank slowly. A fire broke out aft. The bulls raised a terrific roar. Some of them leapt overboard and swiftly swam away from the ship.

We picked up the captain and his mate, leaving the other castaways to the mercy of the sea. Their boats made for the land, which was barely visible. It would take them a long time to make it.

The *Murena* proceeded on her way.

The bulls off the burning steamer were swimming in our wake. There were five of them. The one in the lead was a big black beast with a white head. His horns had been torn out or perhaps blown off by a shell splinter. He lifted his bleeding muzzle with a bellow of pain and terror.

The steamer was all ablaze. The fierce twisting tongues of flame threw up clouds of black smoke. The frightful roar of the bulls, the roar of a whole herd, rent the air and carried far across the sea. There was in it a frantic appeal, a curse upon our heads. The stern quickly slumped. Another minute—and the ship took the final plunge. The steam-boilers exploded, shooting up a huge pillar of water—the ship's dying sigh.

All was over.

A long swell rocked the sea.

The *Murena* gathered way upon her. The bulls dropped behind, all except the white-headed one, the strongest of the lot, who followed close in our wake. My God, the way he bellowed! He started on a low rumbling note, which rose to a shrill wail. He sobbed, he cried, he threatened. This dying plaint of the doomed animal harrowed the very soul of the sailors.

They looked aft in utter silence. Their faces were grave, like those of men who had just lost someone near to them. Electrician Sidorov, the inveterate drunkard, furtively wiped away a tear.

I went below a saddened man.

Our sailors were treating the German skipper and his mate to dinner. They were eating and smiling, as much as to say, "You and we are friends."

Theirs was clearly a case of being between the devil and the deep blue sea!

The time until evening passed uneventfully. We met several neutral vessels. Spent the night again at the bottom.

The next day the weather broke. We sighted a rocky coast with hidden bays. We got in with the land. The sea here roared and raved. Gigantic breakers incessantly pounded the rock-bound coast, raising seething foam and flying sprays like glass shrapnel. The bruised battle-scarred cliffs gazed grimly into the mysterious distance, whence fresh legions in white helmets bore down upon them.

A whisp of smoke appeared.

The *Murena* swung across the path of the unknown vessel. The smoke drew nearer. When the ship's masts stood etched against the blue sky, we submerged.

After a while the commander reported down from the conning-tower:

"A German vessel. I can't make out what type."

We made all snug for shooting.

Then came the command:

"Forward tubes—ready!"

I stood by the starboard torpedo-tube, one hand on the valve handle and my foot on the pedal. The other torpedo-man stood in a similar pose at the larboard tube. We waited for the next words of command, the terror-fraught, fatal words while somewhere at the back of our mind lurked a glimmering suspicion that we were dealing with some naval vessel.

Torpedo officer Kudryavtsev stood at the voice-pipe near by to pass on the orders. His mouth was half open, and his skinny neck stretched out unnaturally, showing a bulging Adam's apple.

The tension grew. All stood frozen at their stations with wide unblinking eyes. Every minute brought us nearer to some fateful border-line. The uncertainty, the mystery of it was like a crushing weight upon our hearts.

"Starboard tube——"

A pause, brief and agonizing. We held our breath, and our lungs felt like bursting with the awful strain.

"Fire!"

The word fell with the finality of doom, shattering our ears. My heart bounded. I pulled the valve handle and simultaneously pressed the pedal. The smooth torpedo slipped out of the tube like a greasy carcass sending a shudder through the boat's frame. It shot out like a cork from a gigantic bottle, gave a squeal of malicious glee and went hurtling towards its target with the roar and speed of an express train.

The shock knocked the men off their feet, but they instantly sprang up again. We all stood now with legs planted wide apart, in anticipation of the explosion that would fling our boat aside.

"Larboard tube—fire!"

Then once more agonizing moments of suspense.

We missed both times.

As we afterwards learnt, it had been a German steamer armed with guns. That was why our commander had decided to sink her without warning. At the last moment, however, everything was spoilt by a trivial accident—the commander broke his pince-nez, and without them he was as helpless as a blind pup. The steamer got away unscathed, but we found ourselves in a predicament we had not foreseen.

We surfaced, and had scarcely opened the conning-tower hatch, when a German destroyer suddenly appeared. And a submarine has no deadlier enemy than that. She came tearing down upon us.

"Rig for diving!" the commander yelled, rapping out the rest of the orders all in a lump.

Everyone realized that we were in imminent danger. Our prisoners sitting in the fore part realized it, too, as their staring eyes and white faces only too clearly testified.

The pumps started working, and the water rushed into the tanks when the first depth-charges started exploding round the boat.

Slowly, oh, how agonizingly slowly, we sank. Better crash-dive to hell than be cut in two by the enemy's keel. Suddenly there came a heavy crash right overhead above the fore part of the boat, followed by a sound of splintering glass. The electric lights went out. I felt as if my brain had exploded and burst from its skull. Perhaps this was death? But no, I was still alive; I could hear someone calling upon God in the pitch darkness, someone else swearing profanely.

We had scarcely recovered from the shock when we felt something bearing down on us with a roar like that of a raging fire, then something tremendous rolled over us with a sickening crash, like the sound of a collapsing building. The *Murena* almost heeled over. The boat shuddered throughout her creaking frame. Crockery and other small objects inboard flew about with a clatter. Shrieking voices battered against the walls of our steel cigar.

Our boat dived into the abyss, shot down like a flat-iron. We had found here our eternal resting place—that much was clear to me. Farewell, life! The world was blotted out to us for evermore!

Suddenly the *Murena* touched bottom. The screams ceased abruptly, as though the whole crew had been struck dead. Probably all were listening, as I was, for the sound of a leakage. There was dead silence, a terror-breeding silence that seemed to have crushed the very breath out of all of us. All of a sudden an imperious shout burst upon the hushed darkness:

"Keep your heads! No panic!"

It was the voice of our commander, a terrible voice. It was both heartening and frightening. But it held us in an iron grip.

There was no more panic. Orders sounded from the conning-tower. They were accurately carried out in utter darkness by groping but practised hands.

A few minutes later the lights went up.

Hope flashed in the men's eyes.

The depth-gauge showed a hundred and thirty-two feet. No leak had been sprung. A weight was lifted from our minds.

"Thank God. . . ."

"We'll get out of it, now. . . ."

The German skipper was saying something to us. His lower jaw quivered, and there was terror in his tear-filled eyes, as though someone were holding a knife at his throat. He shook his head and pointed to his mate. The latter lay crouching on the bunk without stirring, his head in his hands. His mouth was open, twisted, baring his teeth. His staring eyes had in them a look of glazed horror. We sent for the surgeon's assistant. He felt the man's pulse and listened to his heart.

"He's done for! His heart couldn't stand the strain. . . ."

Someone added his comment:

"Yes, it's murder for anyone who isn't used to it. . . ."

Our commander inspected the boat. His face was calm. That set our minds at rest. We tested the periscopes.

They did not rise or turn. Apparently they were both bent. We would have to grope our way out of here blindfolded. There could be no question of breaking water until nightfall.

The order was given to blow the tanks of some of their ballast in order to give the boat some buoyancy. Simultaneously the electric motors were switched on. But the *Murena* did not budge. We reduced some more ballast. The depth-gauge still showed the same figure.

The commander came forward. All eyes were trained upon him. But he said nothing and merely bit his lower lip and twisted his fair little beard into the shape of a question-mark. That was a bad sign: it meant that something was seriously wrong.

The horrible truth struck my brain with a shock: our boat was stranded in the mud, sucked into the oozy floor of the sea. The full horror of our situation dawned upon me. If we freed the ballast tanks completely, there might be a chance of rising to the surface. But what if the enemy destroyer happened to be somewhere in the vicinity or close at hand? It would mean certain death. On the other hand, if we stayed under till nightfall, our boat would sink still deeper into the mud.

Utter resignation to their fate was stamped upon the stricken faces of the crew.

The dead man stared at us with glassy eyes, and his mouth hung open as if to scream, "There is no escape for you!"

Is there really no way out, the thought kept returning with maddening persistence.

"Take the body away!" our commander ordered brusquely.

Several sailors rushed over to the dead man and hid the body in the fore part under the decking.

The commander consulted his watch and said confidently:

"It's nothing! We'll lie here a bit, then start off again. Straight back to base. Meantime, every man can enjoy himself in his own way, as the devil said, sitting down naked in the nettles."

He smiled, and all the rest smiled as if at a command. We believed in our commander's lucky star and were upheld by the cheering thought that he knew the *Murena* as few men knew their wives.

Our commander spoke with the skipper in German. We listened and understood nothing of their talk. The other officers were standing around too. The skipper tried to smile but merely produced a pathetic grimace.

"He doesn't want us to be sunk by a German destroyer," our commander interpreted. "He wants our boat to escape. There's a patriot for you."

The officers withdrew to the wardroom.

Zaleikin nudged me.

"What do you say, old chap?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing your grandmother! Answer me this one: why does a sheep's tail hang down and a goat's tail stick up?"

Zaleikin paused to let this sink in, then added gravely:

"I'd advise you to think it over properly. It's a philosophical question, one might say. The whole meaning of life is contained in it."

"What a chatterbox you are!" the sailors laughed.

Zaleikin looked round at everyone with a sly smile.

"Not long ago I had the queerest thing happen to me, boys!"

"That's right, pal, spin us a yarn and cheer us up a bit," the men cried eagerly.

"This isn't a yarn, it's the genuine article," Zaleikin began. "You can take it from me. Well, I was walking the town one night. It was pretty late. Few people about. All of a sudden I sees a housemaid sailing down the

pavement, like a trim little yacht standing down the fairway. And in her wake, strutting along importantly, was a dog. A great husky dog, as big as your yearling calf. One of those Saint Bernards, you know. I eased in, and heaved alongside her. The rest you know—the usual line of petter: hullo, how do you find yourself this evening. Things went swimmingly. We strolled about the town. Passed down some garden fence. Trees throwing shadows. This is just the spot, I thought. . . ."

Practically the whole crew had gathered round Zaleikin. I was there, too. The plight of our boat was forgotten. We all hung on the speaker's lips.

"Then I started the cuddling and kissing act. Of course, like every other girl who gives in the first time, she ah'd and oh'd making out she was one of your ironclads. Just then—bang!—I got a terrific wallop in the side! Sent me flying head over heels. I lay on my back, looking up, and, jumping jiminy!—there was the dog standing over me. Snarling right into my face, showing his fangs, his hair all bristling. I got a nasty shock, I can tell you—he frightened me clean out of my wits. I couldn't even stutter. Then the housemaid of mine started calling him off. 'Now then, Trezor,' she says, 'you mustn't touch him! Down! There's a darling. Come here. . . .' He got off me and let me go in peace. I scrambled to my feet, more dead than alive, and started backing out. I could scarcely drag my feet. All my inner and outer machinery was thrown right out of gear—just no bloomin' good at all. That housemaid beckoned me with her finger, but there was nothing doing. That dog had put me off my peck all right. . . ."

The men's nervous laughter rang through the boat.

It occurred to me that but for Zaleikin we might have all gone crazy.

The commander was in the conning-tower. He issued the order for surfacing.

I wondered whether we would ever see the light of day again.

The ballast tanks emptied noisily. The electric motors worked at full speed. All the crew, including the officers and the German prisoner, flung themselves furiously from one side to the other in an attempt to rock the boat loose.

"Starboard! Larboard!" commanded the chief officer.

But the boat did not budge.

Once more terror gripped men's hearts with icy fingers.

It was decided to fall back on our last resource—to launch the torpedo. If that did not help, the *Murena* would be our coffin.

"Both motors—full speed astern!" rapped out the commander.

The torpedo shot forward.

The *Murena* started like a living creature and leapt upwards, as if glad to have wrenched herself free at last from the oozy grip of the sea.

The destroyer was a long way off at the time, and we escaped notice. We submerged again and proceeded at a depth of thirty to forty feet. We moved along without the use of the periscopes, and did not rise to the surface until nightfall.

Wireless operator Zobov sent news of the *Murena* flying ahead of her.

The sky shimmered with the heat.

The *Murena* ploughed the smooth surface of the sea, racing towards her native shores.

We were sitting on the upper deck. The sun beat hotly down upon us. Our tortured souls were filled with the restful blue light. No one cared to speak about our recent experiences. Our only wish was that they should never be repeated.

Zaleikin was singing and playing, his accordion stretched to the full width of his arms. Its notes fluttered and danced in the blue air, weaving themselves round the mellow voice of the tenor.

Someone suddenly shouted:

"Land ho!"

We all gazed ahead. Churches, houses, a harbour slowly floated into view from below the horizon as if rising out of the sea.

A patrol destroyer came out to meet us. We semaphored each other while still at a distance, then approached within hailing distance and hove to.

"My congratulations!" the commander of the destroyer shouted from the bridge. "You're in today's papers. . . ."

Our commander gave him a brief account of our cruise and in turn asked:

"What's the news ashore? How are things at the front?"

"None too good. . . ."

After speaking each other, the ships parted.

The sky radiated joy. The sparkling watery steppe was studded with silver. One could hardly believe that somewhere guns were roaring, machine-guns chattering and human blood was flowing.

The harbour swept slowly towards us. The sea-gulls wheeled round our boat, greeting us with cries.

I ask nothing more of life. Next to me sits Pauline, tender as a soft sea-breeze. The curtain is drawn and the room is in semi-gloom. What do we need lights for, when our hearts are burning so high? Ah, what magic there is in her sweet voice!

"I went down to the sea-shore every day, looking out for you. I used to stare my eyes out. I had begun to think you'd been killed, when suddenly you turned up. . . ."

"No, Pauline, we fooled death again, got away by the skin of our teeth."

Pauline clings to me with utter abandon, murmuring passionately:

"My darling submariner! Light of my eyes, my dear heart! Tell me—do you love me?"

I answer her for the hundredth time:

"I love you!"

My heart throbs with a wild tumult and my veins tingle with the fire that runs in them.

Our boat's hull is damaged and her periscopes are twisted. Soon she will be put in dock for repairs. That means an idle spell for us.

Life at base follows the old routine. An outside observer would take us for a happy-go-lucky crowd of harum-scarums. Actually this is only make-believe on our part, a seeking of oblivion from past and coming horrors. But this pretence is not always a success. All too often I am aware that this spirit of boisterous gayety and devilment is a mere mask. Dumb anger against what is going on in the world rankles in the men's breasts, and at times finds vent in bitter remarks.

"When the devil are we going to stop walloping each other? There's no sign of the war ever ending. . . ."

"Ugh, it would be a good thing to bash in the ring-leaders' heads for them. Give 'em such a crack that the whole world would hum!"

"That's what it's coming to. And it's going to be a sight tougher than nineteen five, let me tell you; the devil himself will start saying his prayers from fright."

Sometimes I find myself wondering how all these two hundred men became submariners. It were as if some mighty but invisible hand had taken each of us by the scruff of his neck and dragged him here—to this transport, to these submarine monsters—from all over Russia. One has been made to look after the electric motors, another to fire the guns, a third to discharge torpedoes.

I mentioned it to Zobov. He gave a look round and answered in a low voice:

"The reason is because the majority of mankind are idiots! That applies to all of them—whether they are Frenchmen, Russians, Englishmen or Germans. . . ."

"How is that?"

"They are carrying out the will—the wicked will—of an insignificant minority."

Zobov roughly calculated the number of people wearing khaki, the number working for war at the factories, on the fields and in the mines. He even counted the neutral countries who were supplying munitions. The result was a host two hundred millions strong, the world's most efficient manpower armed with the finest equipment. Zobov mentally put that host to work building new canals to join the seas, digging up the whole Sahara Desert and irrigating it with artesian wells. In place of those dead yellow sands there appears a new flourishing country covered with tropical growth.

"Bravo, Zobov! I subscribe to your ideas whole-heartedly."

The Navy is agog with excitement: the Tsar is reviewing the fleet in person.

Things at the front were going the wrong way for us. And so the Tsar was passing around the weary troops to raise their fighting spirits. Quite unexpectedly he paid us a visit too.

In the harbour all is stir and bustle.

Our *Murena*, too, is making ready to receive the royal visitor. We hastily tidy up. All the naval chiefs are present. The excitement is tremendous.

Every now and then the band strikes up in the harbour, and cheers can be heard. All the ships are dressed with flags.

All of a sudden Commodore Berg came dashing down to us in a boat. His face was the colour of a smoked salmon. He stared at our commander pop-eyed, and the words stuck in his throat so that he could hardly get them out.

"He'll be here ... in fifteen ... twenty minutes ... yes.... I've recommended the *Murena*!... Best fighting boat. Get the crew dressed in clean uniforms at once! D'you hear? This very minute!"

"Yes, sir!"

We swiftly carried out Berg's order. More wearisome waiting. At last we were drawn up on the *Murena*'s upper deck. The Tsar appeared, picking his way down the gangway, followed by his staff. He received the report of our commander, then greeted him, speaking with a burr.

This was my first glimpse of the man who is the captain of that great ship called Russia. The importance of the Tsar had been dinned into me ever since I was a child, and I expected to see something out of the ordinary. I had always imagined him as being exceedingly kind, gentle as the early breath of spring, or stern and grim as the underground rumble of a volcano—according to circumstances; a man with all-knowing, all-seeing eyes—there was no fooling him! But actually he was nothing of the kind. An ordinary man in the uniform of a naval officer.

He was of medium height. On his shoulders were the straps of a commodore. A reddish pointed little beard. A jaded face upon which time had set its seal. A weary glance of lacklustre eyes. And about his whole figure an air of vital deficiency and flabbiness. He looked as if he had gone to seed.

"The *Murena*—for inspection! All hands to battle stations!"

The upper deck cleared in an instant. We scattered inside the boat, every man at his station.

The Tsar walked past slowly, his eyes wandering over the maze of machinery and the stony faces of the crew. Behind him, like geese after the gander, came the royal suite bearded and shaved, thick-bodied and scrawny, bemedalled, aiguilletted and bedecked with gold. The effect was dazzling, but at the same time the whimsical idea occurred to me that if all those men were stripped of their uniforms, what would remain of their dignified solidity? Laughter quivered within me like a flaw of wind that ruffles the surface of the sea, while my face wore a mask of loyal blankness. Our admiral "Baldicoot" was there too. For all his obesity, he was now as quick and agile as a field-mouse.

"How long have you been serving in submarine boats?" the Tsar asked our commander.

"Six years, Your Majesty."

A few more trivial questions, and it was all over.

We were mustered again on the upper deck. After that the usual routine with the Tsar passing down the line, peering into the men's faces once more, perhaps stopping to put some question to somebody. It was a custom favoured by all the big chiefs. I furtively watched Zobov, our wireless operator. He stood looking down at the Tsar from his superior eminence with the air of a judge regarding a criminal in the dock. Their eyes met and held for a long moment with a sort of challenge. It seemed as if something dreadful was going to happen. One would demand, "Why have you started this slaughter?" And the other would command, "Load a gun with that fool!" Before the order could be carried out, Zobov would shout, "I am not alone! We are millions! You can't squeeze all Russia into a gun!"

The Tsar could not sustain the glance. He turned away.

"Good-bye, boys!"

"Good-bye, Your Majesty!"

We gave a last round of cheers. The inspection was over.

The Tsar has left us a sheet of paper with the inscription: "Visited submarine *Murena*. Nicolas II." Then came the date. It has been decided to put that sheet of paper in a gilt frame and hang it up in the *Murena*'s wardroom.

My impression of the event was that the Tsar could rouse enthusiasm only in someone who had never seen him.

Afterwards I asked Zobov, "Well, how did you like it?"

"He's a nobody, just nothing. And out of nothing, as philosophy tells us, nothing can come. Ipso facto, for the present we have Grisha Rasputin. But that will all be changed. . . ."

"When?"

Zobov's brows came down over his eyes.

"Today all Russia is wearing mourning. Whining, moaning, wailing. But soon she'll be fed up with it. Tears must dry up some time, mustn't they? That's when the people will show its teeth. It'll look at those who are responsible for the war with dry eyes. And its speech will be the enraged snarl of a beast. D'you get me? The whole people! It will be a terrible time."

"Do you think we'll live to see it?"

"I am sure of it."

I pressed his hand in silence.

It is evening. On the mess deck of our depot ship the seamen are turning in. The talk runs on that day's review.

"What d'you think our Galley Goof went and done, the crazy ass?"

"What?"

"The Tsar was passing the galley, and this prize mug of ours, instead of devouring him with his eyes clean

down to the last bone, as per regulations, he goes and fixes his blinkers on one of the generals."

"I didn't know which of them was the Tsar," the cook said in self-defence. "So I picked on the heftiest general, one with a ribbon over his shoulder."

Zobov remarked while he undressed:

"Since we've been honoured by such a visit we ought to help His Majesty out of his difficulties."

The men laughed at him.

"Look who's talking!"

"Your kind of help would be like ballast to a drowning man."

Zaleikin poked his head out from under his blanket.

"We have to thank the Creator that the review went off without a hitch."

"What hitch could there have been?"

Zaleikin sat up in his bunk to tell the story.

"It happened in the Black Sea, if I'm not mistaken. The Tsar reviewed the fleet like he did here and was quite pleased. Well and good. Then he walks down the ranks in the usual way, asking the crew all kinds of questions. Things were going fine. And just towards the end he goes and springs a mine. Has everyone flabbergasted! What's the double eagle stand for?—he asks one seaman. But that bloke, it turned out, wasn't very strong in the attic. So the Tsar asks another chap, then a third. Same result. Even our commander was chased up a tree. The Tsar's jaws started working—the thing got his goat, you know. The officers stood there trembling like kittens in a frost. Looked like they were going to lose their gold shoulder-straps. Then one of the stokers rose to the occasion. He wriggled his body about like someone was using a brad-awl on his sitting part. The Tsar noticed it, and says, 'Maybe you can tell me?' 'I can, Your Majesty!' All the big pots beamed—here was help at a dead lift. They even started nodding their heads to him, as much as to say—

now, don't fail us, old chap. 'Well,' says the Tsar, 'tell me what the double eagle is.' And out he comes with, 'It's a freak of nature, Your Majesty!' "

The story-teller crawled back under his blanket amid the laughter of the crew.

We are seeing off one of the submarines of our flotilla—the *Wolverine*.

The noonday sky is flecked with lilac clouds, which are sailing in the direction of the blue-grey sea. A light breeze toys with the ribbons of the sailors' caps.

We stand on the quayside, watching the *Wolverine*'s evolutions. Commander Rakitnikov looks confident, his orders are precise and crisp.

"So long!" our comrades shout at us from the deck.

"Good luck!" we shout back from the shore.

The men in the boat laugh, and so do we, but deep down in our hearts there is a vague anxiety, a gnawing doubt whether they would ever moor to this shore again.

Civilians are standing on the quayside too—the wives, children and relatives of the departing sailors. Sighs can be heard, eyes are filled with sadness.

The distance between the boat and the shore steadily increases.

Handkerchiefs and caps are waved on both sides.

We had left the town and harbour far behind, and were still walking along, oblivious of time and space. There was not a soul besides ourselves on the sea-shore.

"I'm not going a step further!" Pauline declared, throwing herself down upon the grass.

"This is a nice spot," I said, and lowered myself beside her.

The waves were capped with the russet curls of sunset. The merrily piping wind drove them along like a

shepherd his flock. Cloud caravans sailed across the sky. The multi-keyed murmur of the trees, tossing their shaggy crowns, come from the wooded hill that shelved down to the beach.

"It must be dreadful to drown in the sea, Semyon," Pauline said.

I gazed into the blue of her eyes, which had suddenly grown cold.

"It isn't very pleasant to lose your life anywhere. What makes you ask?"

"I've been thinking of my husband. When I heard he'd been killed, I ran down to the sea. The sight of the waves frightened me. . . ."

"Such things are best forgotten."

She agreed with me. There was a change in her voice, when next she spoke.

"D'you know what, Semyon?"

"What?"

"I was terribly afraid of you when we first got acquainted."

"And now?"

"Now . . . I feel so cold. . . ."

She darted a tender glance at me and laughed merrily.

I took her in my arms; she was as hot as the beach sand, warmed by the sun. A mischievous breeze toyed with her locks, and blew them into my face. She dodged my kisses. This was no whim, but a desire to play, to fire the blood, her own as well as mine.

Electric flashes lighted up the dark distance, where patrol vessels were signalling each other. Searchlight beams stabbed the night, swept the ruffled surface of the sea and groped among the waves. What did I care now for these military doings! It was all so far away. . . .

Pauline lay quivering in my arms, showering kisses upon me. I did not stint caresses either. Take all you want, dear heart, all the fire of my soul bestowed by a

lavish sun. Around us was an orchestra of singing wind, forest murmurs and booming surf. The incense-breathing sea lay pulsing at our feet.

Ah, how short that night was!

Dawn followed us home with a glowing eye.

Halcyon evening peeped in through the porthole of the *Amur*.

The submarine *Marten*, belonging to our flotilla, had returned from her cruise. Her crew came trailing down to depot with suitcases and kits.

We pounced on our comrades with eager questions.

"Well, how was it?"

"We settled one ship's hash."

"A cruiser or a battleship?"

"The devil knows! Some big ship, anyway. . . ."

The crew looked excited, unnaturally gay, as though they had trooped in from a wedding party and were still half seas over. The company broke up into knots, all engaged in lively conversation. We listened to the men's account of their cruise with interest.

"The *Marten* ran into the enemy just when he was apparently making for our shores. A whole squadron of ships, with the big ones in the middle and the destroyer escort on the fringe. We closed in slowly. And then we dived to a great depth: We could hear the leading ships passing overhead. When we surfaced and stuck out our periscope, we found ourselves right in the middle of the enemy squadron. Our commander decided to fire a salvo out of the four Jevetsky tubes, which were on the upper deck. The torpedoes were discharged in a fan pattern."

"Did we give it to them!" said Tyurkin, a pock-marked torpedo artificer and a former class-mate of mine. "The sea was a roaring hell! It sent us reeling too. It's a wonder the *Marten* didn't keel over. We had a narrow

escape, too. At first we couldn't make out what it was, but by the sound of it something was wrong on the upper deck. It turned out that one of the torpedoes had got stuck in the tube with its tail. There it was, struggling and kicking against the hull with its propeller, whining and buzzing away like fifty devils. And the damn thing weighed nearly a ton if it weighed an ounce. The whole boat shook from stem to stern. We expected it to go off at any moment. And on top of that there was the whole squadron popping away at us. It rained shells all over the sea. You can't imagine what it was like! We were in such a hurry to get out of it that we crash-dived three hundred feet before we knew where we were. We got out of that holy mess by the skin of our teeth."

"I say, Tyurkin! Tell them about that Sonkin of ours," one of the sailors prompted the speaker.

Sonkin was serving on the *Marten* as warrant officer. He was a fat man on short legs.

"Yes, Sonkin provided a bit of fun. When he heard about that torpedo kicking against the side, he got taken short. He flops down on the deck bung upwards and starts rolling about like he was being roasted on hot bricks. 'My God,' he cries, 'I'm done for!' We hoisted him up and ask, 'What's the matter?' He came to himself and felt ashamed. 'I've had the belly-ache these last two days. Must have eaten something. Spasms, you know—grips you by the guts.' I says to him: 'So it's guts, then! And we thought—looks like this fellow here's going to have a baby!' Did he fly off the handle!"

We listened to these yarns and laughed. The sailors off the *Marten* laughed too. Anyone would think it was a jolly escapade. But I knew only too well the tragedy those men had lived through at sea. The plight the crew of that submarine had been in could be likened to that of a man tied to the muzzle of a loaded gun which would be fired off at any moment.

The bells on the depot ship struck eight o'clock. The deck officer blew his whistle and shouted lustily, "All up for prayers!"

Cursing profanely, we dragged ourselves off to the other mess deck, where, together with the elderly clergyman of the *Amur*, we sang the Lord's Prayer and a psalm. This is repeated day in day out for as long as we are in depot.

When we came back to our compartment Zobov declared:

"Well, let me tell you, the crew of the *Marten* has prayed God today for their own death."

"How d'you figure that?" one of the men asked him.

"Quite simple," he answered. "What did you pray God for? 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.' What does that mean? It's as much as to say, 'We've sunk a German ship, so you do the same to us, Lord, that is, sink our submarine. . . .' "

"Well, of all the wireless chumps—— Depend on him to twist everything round his own way," one of the crew expressed the general opinion.

Family jars have started between Pauline and me.

"You come here too often," she said. "The neighbours are laughing at me. I'm ashamed to meet them."

But I feel that this is merely an excuse and cannot even guess what the real reason is.

"If I couldn't see you, Pauline, life wouldn't be worth living."

"I don't care."

"Oh, you don't!"

We quarrelled.

I did not leave the depot ship for several days. She had to be taught a lesson, dash it! I'd wait until she called me.

But I waited in vain. The days dragged by drearily. I began to stroll about the streets in the hope of running into her, but I never did.

Zobov noticed my state of mind and remarked, as if speaking to himself:

"Never trust a woman, no more than you would the sea, if you don't want to be made a fool of."

I told Zobov the whole story.

"You didn't buy the woman, did you?"

"I didn't, but still——"

"Then why do you stick to her like a leech? Let her be her own mistress."

His unruffled calm was exasperating.

"Oh, you're the blessed limit! You've become dry as dust with those books of yours."

With bitterness in my heart, I went off to see Pauline. I wanted her to meet me as she always did—with that entrancing smile that made my blood sing.

Her room was empty. The alarm-clock on the chest of drawers dispassionately ticked off the passage of time. A moustached face looked down at me keenly from the wall. It was the man whose bones were rotting in the damp earth. I turned away. I kept looking out into the street through the dusty window, but there was no sign of her. Slowly the shades of evening crept over the town. I stood miserably by the window, whistling softly. Hardly realizing what I was doing, my thoughts elsewhere, I traced the word "Hallelujah" on the dusty pane with my nose. When I saw it there I got a shock. What queer impulse had made me write that particular word? And why had I done it with my nose?

I paced the room, brooding and dejected.

Pauline came in round about midnight.

"Who's that there?" she asked, startled.

"Who else could it be but me?"

"Lord, what a turn you gave me!"

She hastily lighted the lamp with trembling hands.

She told me she had been visiting her cousin and complained of a headache. She looked jaded and had blue shadows round her eyes. My presence left her cold; the old eagerness was gone. The look she gave me was enough to turn fresh milk sour.

Two days later everything became clear. I met Mukhoboyev outside her house. Evidently he was waiting for her. He strutted about with the air of wanting to spit at the sky. Involuntarily my fists clenched, but I walked past him as if I had not seen him.

I burst into Pauline's room and said vehemently:

"Pauline! Stop fooling me! Trying to be a flighty flirt, is that it?"

I must have looked pretty tough, because Pauline gazed at me with fear in her eyes.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do! You know that Mukhoboyev is waiting for you outside!"

Pauline threw up her hands in mock surprise.

"Goodness, so that's what he means! It's not my fault if men want to court me and wait for me! But I belong to you alone, Semyon...."

And without warning, she burst into tears.

My anger melted away like a mist before the sun. I felt ashamed of myself and sorry for Pauline.

Yes, we made it up then. We were happy again. That evening gave us back the old flavour of our love. But when I walked back to depot under the light of the moon and stars, doubt crept into my heart once more.

The *Wolverine* was due back, but so far nothing had been heard of her. The seamen were uneasy on her account. But everyone shied at the thought of anything being amiss.

"She'll come back," men said in the depot ship.

"Of course she will. Nothing'll happen to her."

"There's room enough at the bottom of the sea for all of us," Zobov struck in.

Angry eyes swivelled towards him.

"What's that you said?"

"Nothing. You're big cowards, that's what you are. Afraid of the truth like a roach of a pike."

The whole crew went for him:

"Don't croak, you frog!"

"Shut up!"

"Sock him one in the bloomin' jaw—that'll make him dry up."

But Zobov was not one to be cowed by such threats. He had muscles of iron and fists like sledge-hammers.

On the upper deck I ran into our commander.

"She's a bit overdue, sir, I wonder what it can be?"

He understood what I meant and answered with affected calmness:

"She's probably knocking around the skerries somewhere. It's not the first time that's happened during the war. We'll soon have her alongside us, no doubt."

The naval authorities have detailed two submarines and several torpedo-boats to go in search of the *Wolverine*.

The weather is fine, but for me the days are weighted with lead. A storm is brewing—I can feel it in my bones. But what storm? I await the inevitable, my nerves keyed up to breaking point.

My relations with Pauline are becoming more and more strained. I no longer have any doubts that she loves another—that Mukhoboyev is my rival. And every time I come away from her I make up my mind to break off the affair.

"You're living in a fool's paradise," I would say to myself. "You've gone up like a rocket and come down like the stick."

Nevertheless, I yearn for Pauline, I am drawn to her like a bumble-bee to a sweet-smelling flower.

The crews off the *Murena* and the *Trigla* have learned about our rivalry. Mukhoboyev gave the show away. He wanted everyone to know of his victory.

Some of my shipmates try to add fuel to the flame.

"You're not going to let that blighter get the better of you, are you?"

"No one is going to get the better of me. Put that in your pipe and smoke it," I answer. "And if anyone's asking for a punch in the jaw, let him ask just one more silly question like that."

Our spell of idleness was over. The *Murena* had licked her wounds and was getting into sea trim. Carts rumbled in the harbour next to the quayside where our boat was moored. The crane kept turning its long giraffe-like neck, and its chain clanked with a hungry sound. The seamen's strong muscles were tensed and their backs bent under the weight of heavy loads. The *Murena* was swallowing an endless stream of shells, fuel, torpedoes and cases of tinned food, cramming her iron maw full before starting on her cruise.

The cloudless sky blazed with heat. The sea had a molten simmering look. The seamen's work clothes were wet with sweat.

Suddenly, like the crack of a whip, there came the command:

"Attention!"

This was followed by a quavering old voice:

"Good morning, boys!"

"Good morning, your 'xlency!"

It was the Admiral, commander of the submarine division, who had come to visit us.

He was a fat man, who must have weighed about twenty stone, with a blowzy corn-fed face decorated with grey whiskers. This mass of beef and fat was crowned with a vast bald pate. The sailors had nicknamed him Baldicoot.

The officers and men were astonished at the unusual breach of custom on the Admiral's part, for he had come with his daughter. All looked at her with sullen hostility: there was going to be trouble now. But you had to grin and bear it. Baldicoot had power to do anything he liked—for did he not wear golden shoulder-straps with the eagle embossed on them in threatening black?

His daughter went into raptures the moment she stepped down into the *Murena*.

"Isn't it lovely! And how light—just like in a theatre! And all this machinery, Papa, it's simply bewildering! I could never make it out if I lived to be a hundred."

"That is why you are not the commander, Lucy," laughed Baldicoot.

"Papa, what are those machines?"

Her father told her they were diesel engines and explained their use.

"How wonderful it is here! Simply fantastic!"

Lucy has a clear pretty voice, and her eyes shine out of her happy young face like twin stars. Her slim figure is clad in a diaphanous frock. She reminds me of a gull that has alighted for a moment on our boat and will soon flit away into the blue sea air. The idea of such a delightful woman bringing bad luck seems unbelievable. I look at her and wonder—can Baldicoot, that hippopotamus of a man, be her father?

"But, Papa, where is the periscope? I'd like to see it."

"The commander here will show it to you."

She raised her eyelashes and looked sweetly at the commander.

"I shall be delighted," the latter said.

Baldicoot continued his inspection, peering into all corners of the boat. That is what started the trouble. No sooner did he enter the wardroom, than Pilot flew at him. Pilot was the commander's dog, a shaggy fangy hound with a voice like an archdeacon's—a soul-harrowing bass. Baldicoot went as white as sea-foam from fright. The next minute he recovered and flew into a towering rage. His face went livid. And then hell broke loose.

"What the blazes d'you call this? Turning the boat into a dogs' kennel!" he roared.

But Pilot made no nice distinctions: to him a beggar in ragged clothes and an admiral in gold braid were much the same. He barked more furiously than ever.

The commander came running into the wardroom. I had never seen him look so utterly bewildered and lost; even in the face of an enemy destroyer his nerve had never failed him.

He could not even collect sufficient wits to call off his dog and keep him quiet.

Baldicoot, now hopping mad, fell upon the commander.

"It's disgusting! I'll have you court-martialled! The whole lot of you!"

Pilot refused to yield his ground; he stood there snarling and snapping, ready to bite chunks out of His Excellency's leg.

We were at once curious to see which of them would outbark the other, and yet fearful of the issue.

At last Pilot was quieted, but there was no quelling Baldicoot.

"Papa!" his daughter said at last, "didn't the doctor say you were not to excite yourself?"

"Yes, so he did.... Losing my temper is bad for me. But that cur has provoked me."

Baldicoot gradually subsided and then thawed completely. He was always like that: first he would go off the deep end and raise hell, then all of a sudden he would cool off. In comparison with others, our Admiral was really not a bad sort.

He had us mustered on the upper deck, and walked down the line with a joke and a smile for everyone.

"I say, my man, are you married?" he asked one of the seamen.

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"Good, that's fine. When you return home you'll have a wife waiting for you."

Another sailor turned out to be a bachelor.

"Splendid!" said Baldicoot. "You'll have less worry, and won't miss your wife and think of her all the time."

He went up to Zobov.

"What's the matter with you, my man? You look as grave as an undertaker."

"I've been that way since I was a child, Your Excellency."

"What was the trouble?"

"I fell off the *polati** into the dough-trough."

"Hurt yourself?"

Zobov coolly went on spinning his yarn:

"No, Your Excellency. I landed in the dough. Lay there till the morning. That's what started me moping. Mother says it turned my brains sour."

Baldicoot and his daughter laughed heartily, and the officers and crew smiled. Things grew quite cheerful.

It was Zaleikin's turn next. His freckled face looked as melancholy as a monk's at lent, but his eyes were just brimming with fun.

"What were you doing before you joined the Navy?"

"I was working in the medical line, Your Excellency."

* *Polati*—a broad stove ledge in village houses.—*Tr.*

"Medical?"

"Yes, sir, I was working in the dissecting-room of the university together with the students."

"In what capacity?"

"No capacity, sir—I was just the care-taker. My job was to hand up the human bodies and take away what was left of them."

Baldicoot laughed himself into a perspiration. Every now and again he took his cap off and mopped his bald head.

"So you're more or less familiar with anatomy?"

"Yes sir, I took a complete course in it, one might say."

"In that case, my man, you ought to be able to tell me why I am so fat."

Zaleikin wiggled his eyebrows and answered with a straight face:

"It's brains, Your Excellency."

"How's that?"

"Too much of them for the head, so the rest's gone into the stomach."

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared Baldicoot with the sound of a cart rumbling over the cobbles. "Bravo! I love a sailor with a ready wit! Take this for your smart reply."

He gave Zaleikin a three-ruble note.

We were all convulsed with laughter long after Baldicoot had gone.

"Oh my sides, they're fairly splitting!" said the boatswain. "That bald blighter is a scream!"

"What if he is bald? You fellows keep rubbing it in," Zaleikin said. "But I can tell you quite a different story."

"Come on, let's hear it."

"Take billy-goats and donkeys, for instance: they never go bald, but what's the use of them? Can they finish the academy, say, or rise to the rank of an admiral?"

And once more the crew roared with laughter.

But when the admiral's daughter came up in the talk the men grew angry. A woman's presence in the boat would bring us bad luck.

The multi-keyed notes of the bells rang through the harbour off the merchant and naval ships. Within half an hour I would be relieved. Meanwhile, I was standing on the upper deck of the *Murena* with a rifle in my hands.

The sun seemed to be playing hide-and-seek: one minute it would slip behind a cloud, the next peep out in a gush of light. A balmy breeze skimmed the sea, as though it were blowing the dust off it. For all that, one could feel that the wind was making up. The gulls were restless, weaving snowy festoons in the air and emitting nervous cries. We were in for thick weather that night.

I gazed at the outspread sea, which was alive with the ominous roar of our soaring hydroplanes. How like albatrosses they looked! Some of them alighted on the pearl-grey surface of the sea, cruised round a bit, then shot up again into the evening sky. Enemy submarines creeping through the deeps could be better detected from a high altitude. One of the hydroplanes, that miracle of human ingenuity, pierced a cloud and vanished behind it. What did it seek there? Their mother ship, the *Sophia* stood in the harbour near by, her single funnel smoking. She served as a base for the hydroplanes, as our *Amur* did for the submarines.

The *Mudrets*, clearing the pier, stood for the offing. She was a salvage vessel equipped with powerful hoisting cranes. At a distance she looked like an iron bridge with two piers. She was launched during the war and was specially adapted for rescuing sunken submarines.

The *Mudrets* proceeded through the outer roads and headed out to sea. I followed her with my eyes, and the

uneasy thought crept into my head that there had been some mishap at sea.

"Have you gone deaf, Vlasov? Don't you hear me?"

I looked round, and saw our helmsman Mazurin shouting to me from the quayside. Judging by the smile that oozed from under his brown moustache he might have been promoted to admiral at one swoop.

"What's the matter?"

"That Mukhoboyev fellow's gone off with your gal. He towed her out there, outside the town."

"Go to hell!"

He said something more, but I was no longer listening. My mind was in a tumult. Dimly, as through a haze, I remember being relieved. I had no desire to go anywhere, but some irresistible force propelled me outside the town like a wind-driven sail.

The beach was deserted. The inflamed eye of the sun stared at me sullenly from under a glowering sunset. Slowly it dropped its purple eyelids. The sea took on a sombre brooding tint. Things were going to be lively! The air filled with a rumbling noise. Sing, wind, sing a dirge! The surf was in a jocular mood: it unrolled a carpet of white foam at my feet, but the next minute it recoiled. Did I look so terrible as all that?

But where, where was that happy pair? Oh, how I longed to meet them face to face!

I came to hilly ground. Ahead of me I caught a glimpse of moving figures and quickened my pace. I thought so! There they were, walking arm in arm. Pauline caught sight of me first. She darted away, as if Mukhoboyev had pushed her. He, too, looked round.

The distance between us diminished. They stopped, waiting for me to come up. I would be as cool as a Hindoo idol, and keep my hair trigger of a temper in leash. Pauline looked away, her head downcast, as if waiting to hear her sentence. The wind whipped her skirt and

toyed with her locks. Mukhoboyev started speaking first.

"Ah, Semyon! Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"No farther than this spot."

"Is there anything here you're looking for?"

"Yes—low-down meanness!"

"I see!"

There was a pause. We stood drilling each other with our eyes. The surf could be heard booming under the cliffs. Our silence became oppressive. Again Mukhoboyev was the first to break it.

"What are you glaring at me for, like the devil at an archimandrite?"

"Because I'm not a waferwoman to look sweet on you—you mug! Talk about an archimandrite, you're not even a human being as far as I'm concerned."

We were both choking with fury.

"What am I then in your opinion?"

"Just a low-down dirty swab!"

"I see!"

For some odd reason I took off my shabby old cap and put it down carefully on the grass as if it were a crown studded with precious stones. That done, I wondered why on earth I had done it, and probably so did my opponent.

"My fists have been itching for that mug of yours for a long time!"

We closed in with a rush like two enraged tigers.

We flailed each other with our fists. Our heads became battering-rams. We went down, got up, and charged again. Heavy blows were freely given and taken. We gripped each other's throats, clawed each other's faces, and rolled about on the ground. Our faces were bleeding, and the sickening thuds and hoarse curses were punctuated by a woman's shrieks:

"What are you doing? Stop it! For God's sake, stop it! Good heavens, they'll kill each other!"

But her presence, her frantic screams, merely goaded us on to greater ferocity. I had a sudden wild desire to push my adversary into the sea. But apparently the same idea had occurred to him. We rolled over the ground, inching nearer and nearer to the edge of the cliff. At the very brink we stopped, locked in each other's arms. Far down below the surf roared. Hysterical screams battered against our ears. I looked into a ghastly bleeding mask with bared teeth. With a violent effort I tried to fling my adversary over the brink, but he refused to release his hold of me. Suddenly the ground was snatched from under our feet like a sheet of paper from under a glass. It seemed as if the drop into the foaming waves would never end. A lump of salt seemed to have stuck in my throat, clogging my breath. I began to choke. Suddenly we let go of each other.

And oddly enough, when we rose to the surface, we swam away in different directions.

I floundered about in the salty water, stunned by the waves, until at last I climbed ashore at a flat stretch of beach. There was not a sound of any human voice around. I walked off hastily, no longer caring to meet either Pauline or Mukhoboyev.

Back at depot, I went to bed with a racking headache and a slight fever. Crazy visions haunted me all night.

The bottom of the sea.... A green light. Would this fight with Mukhoboyev never end? Who cares! We'd batter and claw each other until we both pegged out. Pauline rushes about naked, her hair streaming. No, it is not hair, but seaweeds hanging down her head. She screams, but somehow her cries sound voluptuous.. All the monsters of the sea are here: sea-cows, reptiles, skates, sharks. They have gathered round us in a staring circle. Mukhoboyev's lower jaw comes away in my hand. His tongue hangs out like a red rag and he cannot utter a word. He

claws at my face, tearing the skin off. Pauline shrieks ecstatically, "Ah, how delightful!" and her body writhes.

There is laughter all round us. Then the roar of the loathsome mob:

"That'll do!"

"We've had enough!"

"Nothing new!"

"We've seen a better show among our own lot."

A man-eating shark proposes:

"Let neither of them get her."

And they all fall upon Pauline and seize her by the legs. We spring apart and stare in horror. In another moment our beloved is torn asunder. All the monsters depart with a roar and din, leaving us her heart. It throbs and quivers, hot as a burning coal. We seize it both together. And suddenly—what can this mean? It is no longer a heart, but an octopus. Two of its tentacles grip Mukhoboyev, six have hold of me. I see it clearly. My whole chest is belted with them. They are throttling me.

I muster my last ounce of strength and give a wrench.

A violent blow on my head. The nightmare scene vanishes.

I crawl about on my knees. My head aches. Before me is a familiar wall with round holes, looking like dull eyes. Slowly it dawns on me that this is the iron hull of our depot ship. A single lamp was burning. The submariners were sleeping in a row, snoring and whistling through their noses. A hissing noise came from outboard: steam was being let off. The vent valve hummed monotonously. From somewhere came a stifled moan. One of the sailors jumped up like mad and yelled, "The fore tank has burst!"

The awakened men started growling:

"You crazy chump! Scaring people out of their wits!"

"May your blasted bladder burst!"

After blowing their throats clear with a few round oaths, the men turned over and fell to snoring again.

What had happened to Pauline? Could she have been drowned?

I could not fall asleep again. I felt sick and dazed.

After a while I got up and went up on deck.

Day was breaking.

On the bridge were the officer of the watch and the signallers. They scanned the sea with binoculars and telescopes, following every movement of the ships in order to enter it all up in the log-book. Alongside the *Amur* lay two submarines. On them, too, sailors were standing guard with rifles.

The sea and sky were in a tumult. The heaving seas were flecked with foam. Low clouds trailing bedraggled tatters crept across the sky. A hollow booming noise filled the sombre air. The horizon narrowed, making the world seem small. Only in the East was there a gap, a yawning crimson abyss with red-hot edges of ragged clouds. And farther, beyond that breach, unfolded an endless expanse pierced with the glowing darts of dawn. The dark-brown hulk of a steel-clad battleship sped towards it, fluttering a fan of reddening smoke. On her port-side hung reeking clouds like volcanoes. One expected them to blow up with a terrific explosion at any moment. On the right a human face loomed among the purple cloud masses, a swelling, leering face blotted out by rage. Another minute, and it disappeared in flames. Morning spread in a flood-tide of light, driving the last lingering shadows of night before it. The red-crested waves surged and reared.

And the ship continued on her way East, forging ahead at full speed towards the red gap in the shattered sky.

The rising sun dazzled my eyes with golden jets.

Not so long ago we had seen the *Wolverine* off on her distant cruise. Forty odd men had waved their caps to us, and we had waved to them from the quay. Had smiled to each other. And now—now we would never see our comrades again.

The destroyers and submarines had returned from their search. They had swept the sea, looked in at many islands, questioned the fishermen, and radioed all the patrol vessels. The *Wolverine* had disappeared without leaving a trace. There could be no doubt that she was lost.

The evil news crept down upon the depot ship like a pestilence.

The morning sun peeped through the open portholes, but it could not chase the gloom from the sailors' faces.

Conjecture ran wild.

"She must have got stuck somewhere between the rocks."

"No, more likely she's got caught in a net barrage."

"Or maybe she ran into a mine."

But no one could unravel the mystery. The *Wolverine* with all souls aboard her had carried the secret of her doom down with her to the bottom of the sea.

"Her commander was such a daredevil."

"Yes, he was a reckless fellow."

"He always liked to play with edged tools."

A seaman gunner off another boat said:

"Misery was at the bottom of it."

Eager faces were turned to the speaker.

"What misery?"

"He had trouble at home."

"What kind of trouble?"

"One of our motor artificers told us that the commander's wife was carrying on with some engineer or other."

"How does he know that?"

"The artificer ought to know that if anyone does—seeing that he's getting off with the Rakitnikovs' housemaid."

The men cursed women and the war.

The irrepressible Zaleikin started to rally me.

"I say, boys, Vlasov has hung out recognition lights—someone has given him a couple of black eyes."

The others were not slow in taking his cue. Yarns were spun and funny stories told, each speaker anxious to get off a joke and raise a laugh. We laugh a good deal, by the way. I realize how badly we all need a good laugh; it is an antidote against madness, like an inoculation against the plague. A merry hubbub reigned in the mess deck. But that was merely a boisterous mask—never for a moment did the feeling of doom release its relentless grip upon our hearts. The loss of the *Wolverine* was not the first tragedy nor the last. The same fate might befall our own boat. We were prisoners at the bar, as it were, confronting the phantom form of our grim judge—Fate. He had no half-and-half verdicts for submariners; he either acquitted them or condemned them to death.

In the afternoon I went for a walk along the sea-shore. On the quay there was a knot of women and children. The same familiar faces that I had seen smiling goodbye to the *Wolverine*. Haunted harassed eyes stared out into the bright distance. All were waiting, waiting for their dear ones to come home.

The watery plain was wrapped in blue silk, shot with sparkling gold. It vied in finery with the radiant sky.

I felt like shouting to the sea: "Don't be so mean! Tell these women to go home."

And it seemed to me that this glitter was not the sun scattering sparks over the gleaming surface. No! It was the burning tears of the drowned seamen.

Commander Rakitnikov's son, a boy of seven, dressed in a sailor's suit, turned to the slender, beautiful young woman at his side:

"Mummy! Look, there's a ship over there. That's Daddy coming home, isn't it?"

He pointed his finger to the luminous distance, where the hull of a patrol torpedo-boat loomed up to seaward against the sky.

"Yes, darling, I ... I think that's Daddy's boat...."

His mother fought back her tears, and her bosom heaved as though the close-fitting black dress she wore were too tight for her.

The boy clapped his hands with delight and cried:

"Oh, isn't that wonderful! Daddy will tell me all about his adventures again...."

The mother broke down, and a half-strangled moan of anguish burst from her throat, "My God! My God!"

I looked at her, thinking—can it be that this sobbing woman is indirectly responsible for the loss of the *Wolverine*?

I walked away.

I know that these people will come down to the beach yet many a time and gaze long at the sea, waiting for its reply. But the sea will tell them nothing. It will shine kindly or surge angrily, but never will it give up its secret. The storm alone knows where the graves of their dear ones are, the storm alone will sing its dirge over them.

There is not a man in the fore part of the *Murena* besides myself. What have I come here for? I don't know. Recent events have shaken my soul. My bruised spirit can find no peace. I sit all alone below deck. The sentry paces up and down aloft and my thoughts drop into the dreary rhythm of his footsteps.

What is this madness that has got hold of the world? The nations are divided into two hostile camps. Killing and crippling each other, turning towns and villages into ashes, trampling the fields, destroying the riches created by dint of such hard work. Not content with being mixed up in this bloody crime, they have dragged God into it, too. Both belligerents pray to Him for help. Both try to cajole Him by burning candles and incense to Him, making donations, flattering Him with words, and grovelling at His feet. In what way does this god differ from the unscrupulous government official who lives on bribes? He will stand up for the one who gives him most. And if the Creator of Life is different, then why does he not condemn this human wickedness? Why does he not breathe fire and fury, and make the earth shudder with his terrible wrath?

But heaven is silent, war-stricken and dumb. And not I alone, but millions of people have already turned away from it and started thinking for themselves.

I gave a start: a siren in the harbour began howling like a dog at the moon.

Zobov came in.

"I'm glad that I have found you here alone. I want to have a word with you."

"Go ahead."

"Look here, Vlasov, stop running after skirts."

"Why?"

"This is no time for it. Don't you see all the killing that's going on? We'll be killed too. And in the name of what?"

"Yes, my friend, I see everything. The whole world is drenched with tears and blood. But what can we do about it—you and I?"

Zobov leaned over towards me, his big-browed face muscular and stubborn as a buffalo's. The steely glint of his grey eyes expressed indomitable will.

"It's the people that count. And the people have got their dander up. The whole country is murmuring. That means it's time to clear the decks."

"For what?"

"For the day of reckoning."

"With whom?"

"With the profiteers who are trading in human blood."

"And then what?"

Zobov began to develop his ideas. I had long suspected what plans he had had. Now I learned that heaven was the only place he had no thought of tackling, at least for the time being; as for the earth, he was going to make a clean sweep of the existing order of things.

He promised to introduce me to his comrades.

"We shall need you," he said.

"All right, Zobov. You can count on me."

I saw now where my energies had to be directed. The people were beginning to kick over the traces. The shackles of centuries were breaking. And the wrath of a nation had behind it the smashing impact of a tenth billow. One could already feel the rising surge of the human sea, the ominous mutterings of the storm. Perhaps I would be smashed to smithereens against the rock of events to come, and spill my hot blood upon the roadway. But I did not care—my course was clearly mapped out before me.

I felt as if I had grown wings.

Evening crept in softly, cloaking the town in mellow gloom.

I was going to see Pauline again. Why? I did not know myself. But on the way I firmly made up my mind to tell her, sailorwise, "Cast off the rope of our love!"

Just that, and not a word more. Then I would turn and go away.

But fate willed otherwise. The familiar room was empty, and a small green padlock hung on the door. The landlady, a pop-eyed little woman, told me resentfully:

"How many times did I tell her not to have anything to do with you fellows. But no, she wouldn't take my advice. And this is where it's landed her."

"Why, what has happened?"

The landlady kept one hand on her hip and made hammering gestures with the other as though driving nails into my head.

"What you could have expected to happen. The day before yesterday, at peep of dawn, she went and swallowed essence of vinegar. They took her to the hospital. God knows whether she'll pull through. And now I've got to suffer for it, with all those police inquiries and what not. At least she might have had the sense, the fool, to leave a note, saying she was committing suicide. They can't get a word out of her now, because she's burnt all her mouth and throat. See what trouble comes through such scamps as you! Don't you come near my house again! My, what a mess someone's made of your face! You're a precious piece of goods, from what I see!"

I strode swiftly down the street, and all sorts of ridiculous ideas crawled into my head. I felt I was bound to meet Admiral Baldicoot and would not be able to force myself to salute him. It worried me. I peered into the faces of all the officers I met, anxious not to miss the Admiral.

I did not go to depot, and on a sudden impulse made tracks for the "Devil's Tart."

The windows and shutters of the basement were closed. It was stuffy in there. The air had a sour odour of stale washing. Sailors and women sat about like conspirators in reeking clouds of tobacco smoke. Most of the men were off our boat.

"Ah, here's Vlasov!" Zobov greeted me.

"Yes, I've come."

"That's good. Join our crowd."

This was the first time I had seen him drunk.

We soused ourselves with methylated spirits and rectified varnish. The women drank with us too. Zaleikin dangled after one of them. She looked bored to death and responded to all his quips with a languid smile. The Devil's Tart was here too. Once a boatswain's wife, she was now his widow, a procuress, and as sly a fox as had ever broken covert. She ruled the whole company like a skipper his crew. Her fleshy eyebrowless face was flushed as if painted with red lead. Her two little eyes were sunk in fat, and floundered about helplessly in an attempt to get out. Thick rolls of fat formed round the silver bracelets on her bare arms.

"Drink, jack tars! Tiptop stuff this. Got a bigger kick than vodka. I'll go and get some more snacks."

The Devil's Tart waddled off, showing a hinder part as broad and flat as the stern of a Finnish *laiba*.

"Port bitch!" one of the sailors muttered.

Galley Goof came out of one of the back rooms in the company of a skinny girl with a sallow face the colour of wrapping paper.

"Well, this *is* a surprise! Fancy seeing Vlasov here too! Everyone's making for the Devil's Tart today like ships crowding into port. What's up with you—you look like you were going to bite someone."

"Nothing."

"Tell that to your grandmother. Your face is as long as a poker."

"And yours is doing so well on free grub it looks as large as life and twice as natural."

The Devil's Tart came back with a plate of cucumbers.

"Help yourselves, dearies! Freshly picked today."

Zaleikin shot her a mischievous glance.

"Ah, Lukeria Ivanovna! With your looks you ought to be an admiral's wife. I'm afraid to look at you in case I fall madly in love with you."

"Why not? For that matter a woman at forty-two is a ripe peach."

"Overripe and sour," someone chipped in.

Zobov looked round at everyone with dull eyes like bits of mica.

"The chief officer told me we're going out on a trial run tomorrow, and the day after that we go cruising. No more high jinks for us. It's going to be hell again for sinful souls. So let's make a night of it, boys!"

"Let's!" the others chimed in.

"Let's make whoopee, raise a breeze!" Zaleikin threw out gaily.

I drank all kinds of rubbish, drank heavily, but I could not drown my misery, my yearning for Pauline.

Zobov muttered gloomily:

"The Earth has gone off the rails. The world is stunned. The nations are crazed. Rivers of blood are flowing. Where will we go hurtling on this planet of ours, I wonder?"

"Oh, stow that planet stuff!" pleaded the cook.

"Shut up, Galley Goof! You've had two years of foreign cruising, haven't you?"

"What of it?"

"It seems they sell everything in those foreign places except wit—you've come back a fool."

"Perhaps you'll lend me some of your wit? I've got nothing to grease the frying-pan with."

"Oh, what's the use of talking to you. You've still got green in the eye."

The Devil's Tart was telling a pock-marked sailor:

"My late husband, the bos'un—may his soul rest in peace—used to think the world of me. He'd come back from sea, and would you believe it, the very sight of me

would stir him up something fierce. He'd come for me like a tiger. Talk about cuddling, why, it's a wonder he didn't break my bones!"

She spoke softly and smoothly, as if she were cycling over a level stretch of asphalt. Her hand lay on her partner's knee, and I could see him simmering.

Zaleikin dropped his girl and gave his attention to the Devil's Tart.

"Lukeria Ivanovna! Guardian angel of all who travel, sail, and dive! Allow me to play something on the accordion and sing a song. I can't live without music."

"Put the helm hard over!" she commanded emphatically. "I'm not a bit keen to see the inside of a jail. D'you want to bring the cops down on us?"

Zaleikin started swearing. After a while he picked up his accordion and went out.

The revelry waxed high.

I don't remember what girl I slept with that night.

It was a still morning. The sky was a fathomless blue; the sea polished crystal. The motionless air grew hot.

The *Murena* got under way, steering past the ships. We passed the pier. Beyond it lay a minefield. We were obliged to keep to the channel, veering constantly from left to right.

The officers stood in the conning-tower. Our commander, as usual, was grave and alert. Chief officer Golubev smiled at the morning sun. The torpedo officer, for some reason, kept glancing back at the shore.

The world was full of light and lustre, but my tortured soul was plunged in gloom. I was standing on the upper deck, and the talk of the other seamen drifted past my ears. A single thought occupied my mind—the thought of Pauline. How had it happened? What had made her poison herself? In vain did I seek a soothing answer.

The *Murena* ploughed up the gleaming crystal with her sharp bows and steadily bore away from the land.

We shut the hatches in preparation for going under.

I went below.

There was a smell of fried onions. Galley Goof was cooking something on his electric range. He had a bad hang-over—his face was puffy and his eyes bloodshot.

"How goes it?"

"Rotten as can be. My head aches like it had a bloomin' diesel in it. And nothing to take a hair of the dog with...."

Galley Goof suddenly broke off with a picturesque oath. It appears that he had put pepper in the stewed fruit by mistake. In his haste to seize the saucepan he knocked the frying pan over.

"Get out, for Christ's sake, before you're thrown out on your ear!" he shouted at me, swearing still harder.

The men laughed.

I passed to my compartment forward behind the watertight bulkhead.

Zobov, with a gloomy air, was drinking water.

Zaleikin was standing in front of the mirror, brushing his natty little moustache and hair with the boot brush, the while he edified the crew:

"If you want a good wife look for her in the kitchen garden and not in the park."

The men's laughter only irritated me.

The throbbing of the diesel engines suddenly broke off. Our boat had switched over to the electric motors. The ballast tanks were partially flooded. We were in an awash condition.

In the silence we heard an angry whisper:

"What the hell! D'you want to kill the crew with poisonous fumes!"

I guessed that it was the cook, getting a soft word in his ear from one of the officers.

Then silence again, the silence of an empty church. Not a sound but the pulsation of the electric motors.

The boat continued on her way, hermetically sealed. The order to increase the ballast in the fore and aft tanks reached us through the voice pipe.

The air whistled, and the tank swallowed the salty water with a furious splutter. The next moment another sound burst upon the ear—the startling sound of a raging torrent. Shouts and screams mingled with it. Several men and the chief officer came rushing into the watertight compartment forward. They were drenching wet, and their faces were distorted. They hastily closed the iron door down, as though barricading themselves against robbers. The next moment several shots rang out. Who was shooting? What was it all about?

I stood frozen in my tracks, stunned by the disaster. The other men drew in their heads, as if anticipating an inevitable blow. I realized in a dazed sort of way that the deck was falling away from under my feet. The *Murena* was sinking into the abyss. Ever faster, faster. She was shooting down like a flat-iron. I took a deep breath and held it.

The water continued to rush into the boat with the roar of a cataract. Our waterlogged little craft grew heavier and heavier. I too seemed to be weighted with lead. My feet were glued to the deck. God, I wished that thunderous roar of the torrent would stop! It shattered my brain, confused my thoughts. I could not make out what was happening. It seemed to me that this was the end of the world, that our planet was hurtling to destruction with a roar and clatter.

A jolt. The boat has come to rest upon the sea floor. Deathly silence falls upon the boat.

We look at each other wild-eyed, questioningly.

"That's all right ... keep calm.... We'll soon find out what it's all about...."

The chief officer tries to calm our fears, but his own quivering lips are bloodless.

The electric lamps burn brightly, as if nothing had happened. Little by little we collect our wits.

"What has happened? Who knows?"

"I do, sir," gunner Sorokin answers hastily, as if the boat's safety depended upon his report. "It was all Galley Goof's fault. He upset some gravy on the range, and it started smoking. Someone began to swear. Goof got scared he'd get it from the commander, so he went and opened the hatch over the galley. I suppose he thought the boat would not go under so soon and he'd have time to let the smoke out. . . ."

"And I saw the torpedo officer shoot him down on the spot," said another sailor.

We look at the depth-gauge. Ninety-eight feet. A mountain of water above us. We are caught in a trap. On the other side of the bulkhead are thirty odd corpses. Soon it will be our turn. There are ten of us, ten doomed men. The iron bulkhead, giving way under pressure of the water, bulges inwards like a bellying sail. Cracks appear in the warped door, which has sprung a leak. We have no means whatever of stemming it. The treacherous vindictive sea is creeping into the fore compartment in order to strangle us with its soft watery paws, strangle us slowly, with cold-blooded deliberation.

"What are we going to do, sir?" we ask the chief officer. "Is this the end?"

"You mustn't lose hope. Have patience. We'll think of something."

Someone reminds himself of Baldicoot. He's the one to blame, not the cook. Why did he have to bring a woman aboard the *Murena*? The chief officer as well as the men curse him. Seaman gunner Sorokin, a habitually ill-humoured and irascible man, shakes his fists and yells:

"If that blasted Baldicoot was here, we'd rip his fat belly open for him!"

Zobov turns to the chief officer:

"What do we have to die for?"

"Listen, boys! I'm only a pawn in this hellish game. This is no time for arguing. Let's think what we can do to save ourselves."

The sea's pressure is increasing. The bulkhead threatens to cave in at any moment. We shall be crushed, overwhelmed, blotted out.

Seaman Mitroshkin begins to sob.

"Shut up!" the chief officer shouts at him. "What are you—a little girl, to start whimpering? Be a man to the last...."

Mitroshkin draws himself up and blinks his tear-filled eyes.

Golubev by now has fully recovered. We all look at him. He was an experienced submariner and knew better than any of us what to do.

"First of all, boys, we've got to let the outside world know the plight we're in. And that can be done very simply: we take the primer tube off the torpedo, pump the air out of it and put a note in. If we launch that torpedo through the tube, it will come to the surface at once. Ships are always passing here. One of them is sure to see it."

"That's true, sir. You're right...."

Hope glimmered like a remote beacon's ray.

Within a few minutes everything is ready. The torpedo slips from its tube, bearing a message from the grave to the outside world.

Although the boat is shipping more water and the deck is already awash, our hearts feel lighter, as if the unseen claws that had been gripping us in a vice were relaxing their hold.

Hope stirs more strongly within our breasts. We talk

of nothing else. Our evolutions had no doubt been watched from the bridges of all the ships, and our long disappearance from the surface of the sea would rouse suspicion at base. They would guess at once that something has gone wrong and would send light craft out to search for us. They would pick up the torpedo and find our message. And then every means would be pressed into service to rescue us from the sea floor—minesweepers, divers, salvage ships. Once more the sun would shine in our faces.

Zaleikin, struck by a sudden thought, dives under his bunk and hastily brings forth his accordion. That instrument, the pride and joy of his heart, is drenched in sea-water. He curses heartily.

"Lucky I hung the mandolin up, otherwise that would be done for too."

Short of gagging him, there is no stopping Zaleikin from singing.

There were only two ways of getting out of our compartment: through the fore hatch, and through the torpedo-tube. The latter means had been resorted to by Lieutenant Rakitnikov in his escape from the British submarine. We discuss the matter. The conclusions we come to are none too cheerful. In order to shoot a man out through the torpedo tube, the terrific pressure of the sea would have to be counterbalanced by still greater pressure of the air, and that meant certain death. We all look up eagerly at the fore hatch. How could we open it with all that weight above us! The sea would rush in like mad and burst our lungs before we could get out. The mere thought of it was appalling.

We firmly decide to wait until we are rescued.

The chief officer brings three bottles of good brandy from his cabin.

"I kept it for the cruise. I like to take a swig at critical moments."

"Our ministering angel!" Zaleikin squeals joyfully. "This will be a sort of Eucharist for us now."

Mitroshkin is the only one who refuses his portion. The brandy is shared among nine men and tossed off at a gulp to go to the head better. A pity we can't get at the boat's supply of liquor—it is on the other side of the bulkhead.

"Woosh! Let's go off with a bang!" Zaleikin cries, reaching for his mandolin.

The strings twang and scatter a merry roulade. A high tenor takes up the song:

> Don't the eyes of Mary dear
> Shine like diamonds when I'm near!

Faces light up, eyes kindle. The water on the deck has risen above our knees. Who cares! A spirit of devil-may-care recklessness takes possession of me too. Death can come this minute for all I care. I'll spit in his bony face and say:

"Do your dirty work and be damned!"

We get onto the bunks and huddle together. Mitroshkin alone holds aloof. He crosses himself furtively and whispers to himself. Zobov pokes fun at him.

"Drop that, you're just wasting your breath. Just think how far away the surface of the sea is, and heaven is still higher. God won't hear you, not even if you howled like a fog-horn."

"Leave him alone," the chief officer says.

The mandolin gives place to the gramophone. A baritone sings familiar words to the accompaniment of a piano:

> O kiss me, dear, and take me near,
> Hold me in your arms!

We listen to the song in moody silence. It has a mocking sound. Up there, in the living world, a lustrous sky is shedding joy around. Life tingles and sparkles every-

where. Perhaps at that very moment somebody is gazing seawards, admiring the play of colours and dreaming of love and happiness. And he never suspects that under that flood of golden sunshine, beneath the blue surface of the sparkling waters, deep down at the bottom of the sea, men are writhing in their death throes. The water keeps rising. The flooded storage batteries cease to work. The electric lights gradually die out. The air grows thick and heavy. We are awaiting not the passionate kisses of a sweetheart, but the cold embrace of death.

"To hell with that record!" cries the chief officer. "Let's have something more cheerfull"

A new record is put on. This time it is a woman cynically singing about a he-man chauffeur. The obscene words are greeted with laughter....

Several tormenting hours pass.

The electric lights are out. We put the Young battery into commission. This is a small lantern that gives a feeble light like a candle. The place is in semi-gloom.

The water has risen to the bunks and stopped there. The pressure on the water-tight bulkhead from outside and inside is equalized. The air, however, has become so foul and thick that one's ears begin to ache.

Every now and then we raise our heads and stare at the fore hatch like hungry beasts at their prey. We argue heatedly. Zobov is for using that means of escape immediately, while our strength still lasted.

"We'll fly out of here together with the air bubble like birds from a cage," he says. "We only have to open the hatch."

Gunner Sorokin supports him.

The others raise objections.

"We may fly up, but where will we land? In the devil's clutches?"

"We'd better wait."

The chief officer is emphatic on this point.

"Sh——what's that!" electrician Sidorov suddenly cries.

His head is thrown back and his right hand points upwards.

We strain our ears. Something is humming up there. Nearer and nearer. At last we make out the noise of threshing screws. Clearly some large vessel is approaching.

Joy and hope find vent in a wild outburst:

"They're looking for us!"

"We're saved!"

The chief officer turns to Zobov, saying:

"I was right. The weather's calm. The torpedo with our message shouldn't drift very far. They'll soon find us. . . ."

"But it'll take some time before they rescue us," Zobov retorts.

A few minutes later the sound of churning screws is heard again.

The hope of being rescued glows brighter in our breasts.

Even Zobov begins to believe it. He looks up at the hatch with his head thrown back. His fists, which are the size of a baby's head, are clenched hard. He snarls like an infuriated lion, "Ugh, to get out of here! If only we could get out of here!"

Aware as I am of Zobov's daring plans, I understand him. Anger blazes up in my breast.

"I'm with you!" I cry. "Your way is mine!"

All the boat's gears and instruments are out of order. They have long since gone cold. The *Murena* is a corpse. The combination of battery acid with salt water

has produced poisonous chlorine. We feel an unpleasant stinging sensation in our throats and nostrils. But we still hope against hope. Sitting in that sinister gloom, utterly miserable, we try to cheer ourselves by talking and joking. Zaleikin takes the lead in this respect.

"Am I sorry for my wife, boys, let me tell you!"

"Didn't you always make out you were a bachelor?" he was asked.

"That was just eyewash. I didn't want you to give me away to the tarts. As a matter of fact I got spliced long ago. The little woman is one in a thousand, I tell you! If you stuck another inch of nose on the one she's got, she'd be a dazzler. I love her like rain does a pig. She loves me, too—like, a cat loves mustard. In a word, you couldn't find another couple like us outside the garden of Eden. Our life together was just one round of joys...."

"How did you manage that?"

Zaleikin, as he always does when yarning, assumes a poker-face.

"Quite simple. One day I'd chuck a billet of wood at her, and when I missed, she'd dance for joy. The next day my missus would shy a pot at my head, and when she missed, it was my turn to dance for joy. And so we had nothing but joy every day. There!"

We drown our fear, our mortal terror in bursts of hilarious laughter.

I think that God—if there is one—must have smiled when Zaleikin was conceived.

The laughter had barely subsided when we heard a frightened whisper:

"Hush, boys! D'you hear that?"

The chief officer raises the lantern. A little way off a crouching human figure looms in the semi-gloom. It is Mitroshkin, crawling towards us over the bunks. He stops and points aft.

"Hear that? Scratching.... Whispering.... They're alive."

"Who's alive?" Zobov demands gloomily.

"Our men.... They're asking us to let them in...."

Mitroshkin does not look himself. Cowering, he buries his face in his hands in abject terror.

Involuntarily we all open our mouths and sit listening. Deathly stillness. Not a sign of life from the outside world reaches us. Is there life anywhere? It seems as if the whole universe is petrified. The light burns dimly, and the black water between the bunks glints lifelessly. Men's faces are stiff, like masks. Eyes cold, vacant. Our lantern is like an icon-lamp in a tomb.

"Ha! The devil! He almost frightened us!" laughs Zaleikin.

A wild hubbub breaks out. All begin speaking together, laughing nervously—anything to break that sinister maddening silence.

The air is getting worse. We can only breathe with difficulty, and there is a roaring noise in our heads.

"The gramophone!" commands the chief officer.

"Yes, the gramophone!" others take up the cry in different keys.

The sounds of an orchestra issue from the big red trumpet, and then, like a boa constrictor uncoiling, comes the tremendous bass of Chaliapine. He blazes abroad the story of the royal flea:

A flea! He, he!

Diabolic laughter batters against our ears, as if someone were hammering the iron hull of our boat.

One of the sailors repeats with Chaliapine:

A flea! He, he!

Several more men join in the laugh with him. Our mirth has a ghastly quality.

The sounds of the orchestra pierce the thickened air, and dart about wildly in the cooped up space. They are drowned by the menacing bass:

The king he called a tailor,
"Now listen here, you lout!
You've got to make a velvet suit
To deck my dear friend out!"

There comes a shriek of laughter. Together with the singer we all repeat:

A flea! He, he!

We are seized with a paroxysm of uproarious gayety; we are convulsed with laughter. Zaleikin throws his head back and makes clucking noises, like a hen. The chief officer holds his belly, his shoulders shaking and his body doubled up as if in pain. Zobov sways from side to side like a pendulum. Gunner Sorokin kicks his legs in the air. Some of the men roll over on their bunks as if they are seized with an epileptic fit. I gasp with laughter and feel as if my chest will burst. Misshapen shadows flit and sway eerily over the bulkhead. The ear-splitting roar drowns out all other sounds. The gramophone has been silent for some time, and Chaliapine is no longer singing, but we keep on repeating his words:

A flea! He, he!

And again a violent squall of laughter shakes our bodies. The whole boat shudders.

I try to stop myself, but I cannot. I try turning my face away, stopping up my ears. Suddenly sheer terror catches me by the throat. I stand on my knees, staring aghast at my companions. It seems to me that they have all gone stark raving mad. Their heads shake, teeth are bared, and tears flow from half-shut eyes. Their figures are contorted as if they are seized with convulsions.

Some men's laughter sounds like frantic sobbing. Stricken with horror, I tug at the chief officer's arm, shouting, "Sir, sir!"

He looks at me blankly, his face deathly pale and clammy. Then his eyes travel dully over the laughing men, and he shouts in a voice that is almost a scream, "Shut up! Stop this crazy laughter at once!"

Eyes fly open in a look of terror and bewilderment.

From above comes a grating sound, like that of a steel cable being dragged across the upper deck. Then a snap, and again that grating noise.

They have found us!

Hurrah!

Several more hours pass.

We have not been rescued yet. In vain do we strain our ears: not a sound more is to be heard.

The air is getting fouler. We are suffering from chlorine poisoning too. The men's faces are ashy, their lips blue, and eyes bleary. We keep sneezing all the time as though we have taken snuff. Our breath comes in painful gasps from wide-open mouths: we are using up the last remaining oxygen. Then a lassitude ensues. My heart begins missing beats. The noise in my head is like that of a rushing train.

Gunner Sorokin is all in. He has crawled away from us and lies on the bunks, moaning, "I'm done for, boys, I can't wait any more. . . ."

At times it strikes me that this is merely a bad dream, that soon I will wake up and find myself in other surroundings. But no, it is heart-chilling reality. How is one to get away from it? The life urge is tremendous, soul-shaking. I envy all the sea creatures. They have the freedom of the sea. If I could I would have turned myself into the smallest of fishes if only to live . . . to live. . . .

Zaleikin attempts a joke, but it falls flat. My head is spinning, and I feel sick. It seems as if thousands of pins are being stuck into my body. It is the effect of that accursed chlorine. It has got into our throats and lungs, and causes a lacerating pain, as if sharp claws are tearing at them.

With every heart-beat, every breath, I feel my mind weakening, my reason giving way.

"Oh, I feel bad..." Sorokin groans. "I'm dying...."

We decide to wait another five or ten minutes.

To crown all, our lantern battery is running down. To save it for an emergency, we switch the light off every now and then. During one such interval of darkness I distinctly catch the familiar smell of a woman's hair. Pauline's cornflower-blue eyes flash before me. Her soft voice sounds in my brain: "Come over this evening...."

Suddenly a shot rings out.

And close upon it a loud voice:

"Switch the light on!"

I brush the cold beads of sweat from my brow and peer round.

Zobov holds the lantern aloft.

All sit frozen in various attitudes, staring at one spot.

Flopping about in the black water between the rows of bunks is Sorokin. He has shot himself. He waves his arms, falls, rises, wheezes and snorts. The spray flies about in all directions. One would think he were merely bathing, were it not for the blood pouring down his face. He tosses his head and makes little grunting noises as though he were enjoying himself. He disappears for a moment under the water only to rise again like a hideous ghost.

I feel myself approaching the border-line beyond which madness begins. A moment more, and I will go over the edge. I am recalled to sanity by a shout. I look round.

Zobov is shaking his fists, shouting:

"It's no use fooling ourselves! By the time they get us out of here it will be too late. We've come to the end of our tether. But we have a means of saving ourselves. . . ."

His words burn themselves into our brains.

"What means? Out with it, quick!"

We all strain towards him.

He looks like a madman. His eyes are popping. The words tumble from his lips.

We scarcely grasp their import. It has something to do with our life-jackets. Every man was to put his on. The pressure in the boat was high. Therefore, the moment we opened the fore hatch we would shoot up to the surface of the sea like corks.

The chief officer throws in:

"For that matter we could also open the compressed-air cylinders. The hatch cover will open easier then."

All of a sudden a distinct tapping comes from the opposite side of the boat. We all swivel round and fall silent. The tapping is repeated.

Zobov leaps from one row of bunks to the other across the water in a single bound. We rush after him, shouting, "We are saved!"

What sailor does not know the Morse code? Zobov, under the dictation of the chief officer, taps out the words upon the iron hull with a spanner. Sanity returns to all with a rush. We listen to the dialogue, quivering with excitement:

"Who is there?"

"Divers."

"What are your plans?"

"First to get slings under your boat. And when the *Mudrets* arrives we shall raise you."

"Where is the *Mudrets*?"

"On her way out from port N."

"When will she be here?"

"In about twelve hours."

"It will be too late. We can't last many more minutes."

The divers go on tapping, but we no longer listen. Our sole rescue ship, the *Mudrets*, would arrive hours too late. No one else could save us. Like men sentenced to death, we had been expecting our pardon. From whom? From mere chance. And now we were thrown into the clutches of our merciless executioners—the foul air, the poisonous chlorine, the sea-water.

A crushing sense of defeat, utter despair.... We are on the scaffold. The noose tightens round our necks. Another moment, then darkness, chaos.

Zobov is shouting wildly:

"Let's risk it, boys!"

We shout back as one man:

"Let's risk it!"

We are now prepared to take any risk. We act on a definite plan, approved by all. First we cast lots for queueing up at the hatch. Then everyone, as best he could, swathed his head, ears and face in his bed-clothes, leaving only his eyes uncovered. This is to protect us against the pressure of the water and save us from injuries when being flung against the iron parts. The hatch hand-wheel is unscrewed. Now the cover is held in place only by the weight of the water. It now remains to let the compressed air out of the cylinders. This is to be done by the last man in the queue—electrician Sidorov.

Zaleikin, even at that terrible moment, remains true to himself: more dead than alive, he ties his mandolin to his chest.

Mitroshkin alone does nothing to save himself. He keeps aloof and stares at us vacuously.

All is ready. Sidorov crawls away over the bunks to the fore end where the air cylinder valves are. We can hear him splashing through the water as we stand wait-

ing in the line. I am third. Behind me is the chief officer. And one man down is Zobov.

The lantern fastened to the deckhead next to the hatch burns faintly.

Torpedo artificer Ryabushkin, who is first in the queue, shakes from head to foot and looks round like a harried animal.

"I can't . . . I'm scared to death. . ." he stammers.

Zobov rushes up to him, flings him aside and shouts: "Idiot! Take my place!"

Would we break through the thick layer of water or would we be crushed by the tremendous weight? Something in my breast seems to swell and press painfully against my ribs. If only my heart stands the strain and does not burst! The crucial moment has come. Our last chance.

"Let the air out!" yells the chief officer.

"Aye, aye, sir!" Sidorov answers out of the darkness.

"Open the valves slowly!"

"Yes, sir!"

The water around us begins seething, and the spray flies about. The air squeezes us like a soft press, wringing tears from our eyes and choking us. The water splutters, and it seems as if we have fallen into a boiling cauldron.

Zobov, with an air of grim determination, begins to open the hatch cover. . . .

My recollections of what happened next are dim and confused. I remember a terrific crash, an ear-shattering roar. I am stunned. Darkness blots out the world with a blinding shock. I hold my breath. Toothless ravenous jaws seize me, crush me into a ball and spew me out. I fly spinning like a top. Then I seem to have turned into a torpedo. I streak through the water for what seems ages. A last flicker of consciousness, then all is darkness.

How long had I been coming to? I do not know. A blue canopy hangs above me. It is perfectly new and clean. But what is that white patch doing there? And why has it been cut out so unevenly? A black beard bends over me. Silver shoulder-straps. A hand with a phial in it reaches for my face. Something assails my nostrils with a sharp shock. I twist my head and shut my eyes. But when I open them again everything becomes clear. A steam launch, the sky, a white cloud, the slanting rays of the sun. I am undressed and my swathed head is bare. My body is being turned over and massaged. It is annoying, because it prevents me from seeing the blue heavens. They are as tender as the glance of a mother.

"Drink this," says the doctor and hands me half a glass of brandy.

Hot streams rush through my body. I am in a state of utter bliss, and feel sleepy. Suddenly the disturbing thought strikes me—am I not dying? Is not that shining sky the delusion of a sinking mind? In a moment I will come to only to find myself back in that iron coffin. No, I am safe, I am alive! I see launches, boats, naval craft moving across the sea. I hear voices calling to each other. In the stern sheets of the nearest boat I see several men holding electrician Sidorov. He struggles in their arms, laughing wildly and shouting, "The flea! He, he, he!"

Next to me sits Zobov. The doctor is telling him:

"Eight men have been picked up. That means there's only one missing?"

"Quite right, sir. One man."

My eyes shut of their own accord. I know who that man is, but I can't remember his name. Still struggling with this problem, I fall asleep.

1922-23

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexei Novikov-Priboi belongs to the elder generation of Soviet writers, who began their literary career long before the October Revolution.

Alexei Novikov was born in 1877. His religious mother wanted him to become a monk. Probably that is what he would have been but for a chance meeting with a sailor, whose yarns and the romantic inscription on whose cap—"Storm Conqueror"—fascinated the peasant boy, born and bred in a village surrounded by a wall of forest. This meeting, according to the author, played an important part in his life. It aroused in him a spirit of adventure and a keen desire to follow the sea. (This incident was subsequently narrated in the autobiographical story "Destiny," which opens the present collection.)

Novikov was conscripted when he turned twenty-two, and he became a seaman in the Baltic Fleet. His arrest on suspicion of being connected with the revolutionaries, and the subsequent investigations into his case led to his being transferred to the Pacific Fleet.

After the Battle of Tsushima in the Russo-Japanese War, which began in 1904, we find Novikov in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. It was here that he conceived the idea of telling the nation the truth about the war and the Battle of Tsushima. He interviewed the men who had taken part in the battle and collected their diaries and notes. Tsushima was a theme that engrossed him all his life. The writing of the epic narrative *Tsushima*, which is his greatest work, occupied him for many years (from 1905 to 1910, and from 1928 to 1941).

On his return to Russia in 1907 Novikov published two pamphlets about the Battle of Tsushima under the pseudonym of A. Zatyorty. Written by an inexperienced literary tyro, these pamphlets were remarkable for their wrathful condemnation of those who were responsible for the Tsushima disaster. They immediately attracted

the attention of the tsarist censorship. Novikov was obliged to leave the country to escape persecution, living as an émigré in France, England, Spain, Italy and Africa, and sailing before the mast on merchant vessels.

Although he had to rough it a good deal, Novikov did not drop his literary work. His own eventful life furnished him rich material. His experiences as a stowaway in the holds of ships led to his writing "The Stowaway"—his first story—in 1911. In 1912-13 he lived on Capri as a guest of Maxim Gorky, and there he wrote his "Loony," "Story of the Boatswain's Mate," and other stories.

At that period Novikov became a real writer with a style and manner of his own. His pen-name—Novikov-Priboi was now often to be met on the pages of the literary magazines. He wrote about war, about peasant life, but most of all and best of all about the sea. His sea stories tell us of the daring, the inexaustible humour and courage of the deep-sea men. Their gallant battle with the wild elements, the romance of the sea, which the author loved with all his being, form the leit-motif of all his works.

Novikov-Priboi returned to Russia a year before the imperialist war broke out. Completely absorbed in revolutionary activities, he wrote nothing for several years.

In 1919 the writer reverted to his favourite theme and wrote "Under Southern Skies" and "The Sea Beckons." These were followed by other stories, which enjoyed wide popularity, such as "Submariners," "A Woman at Sea" and "The Crazy Cruise," and the novel *The Salt Font.*

During the Great Patriotic War the author wrote a series of articles and sketches about Soviet soldiers. He also began a novel *Naval Captain*, in which he intended to describe a seaman of the old Russian Navy, a self-educated man, who goes through the harsh school of the war and the Revolution and ends up as a Soviet naval officer. Owing to the author's death in 1944, this book was unfinished.

НОВИКОВ-ПРИБОЙ

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